

LEGACY'S END  
RETURN OF THE WHILLS

GREGORY O. SCOTT



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## Dramatis Personae

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AG-37, assassin droid  
Jao Assam, former Imperial Knight (human male)  
Jhoram Bey, rogue admiral (Weequay male)  
Deliah Blue, mechanic (Zeltron female)  
C-3PO, protocol droid  
Hogrum Chalk, regent (human male)  
Anj Dahl, starfighter pilot (human female)  
Porat Derrol, fugitive (Chagrian male)  
Saarai Derrol, former Sith apprentice (Chagrian female)  
Marasiah Fel, prisoner (human female)  
Eli Horn, Sith apprentice (human male)  
Ganner Krieg, Imperial Knight (human male)  
Kyra, adept (human female)  
Khat Lah, mystic (Yuuzhan Vong male)  
Lowbacca, Jedi Master (Wookiee male)  
R2-D2, astromech droid  
Azlyn Rae, Imperial Knight (human female)  
Sauk, mechanic (Mon Cal male)  
Treis Sinde, Imperial Knight (human male)  
Cade Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)  
Ania Solo, fringer (human female)  
Marin Skirata, Mandalorian (human female)  
Jariah Syn, fringer (human male)  
Darth Talon, Sith Lord (Twi'lek female)



## Prelude: A Long Time Ago...

Akar Kesh was striking no matter how many times one had seen it. The tall butte on which it sat rose hundreds of meters from the sea, isolated and majestic. Water, pumped to the rock formation's highest layers by ancient engineering, fell in steady curtains down its side and back to the sea. On the flat top, eight tall rectangular monoliths sat arranged around a shallow pool. It was a place of symmetry and grace, and many counted the Temple of Balance as the most holy of the Je'daii centers on Tython.

Tython's last Tho Yor hung above Akar Kesh as if to accentuate the point. The massive ark, eight triangular sides arranged as a double-pyramid of black stone, hovered in the air through powers unknown. Over ten thousand years ago, eight other Tho Yor had converged on Tython from different corners of the galaxy, bearing with them pilgrims from dozens of planets and species that could touch the Force. These pilgrims became Je'daii, and for ten thousand years the Tho Yor had hung above their temples, silent and inscrutable, the most prominent of Tython's many mysteries.

After ten thousand years, that had finally changed.

As she stood beside the shallow pool that topped Akar Kesh, Lanoree Brock, Je'daii ranger, had a hard time drawing her attention from the Tho Yor's reflection in the still water. With effort, she forced her eyes off the double-pyramid and onto the semicircle of Je'daii Masters who stood around her and her companions.

“The experiments we’ve run have all been successful. The test-flights have shown our Je’daii pilots are capable of controlling the craft,” said the man beside her. “There’s no reason to delay the mission any further. We should depart as soon as the ship has been stocked for a long-term journey.”

Tave, the Noghri combat master of Stav Kesh, said, “A long-term mission, Master Quan-Jang? Let us be honest with each other. The journey you propose is almost certainly one-way.”

“That’s possible,” Quan-Jang admitted. “But I am not *proposing* this mission. I’m ready to carry it out, personally. All I need is your blessing.”

The middle-aged human- dark-skinned, bald, with black lenses over his eyes- was the temple master of Anil Kesh, center of Je’daii scientific research. Since the defeat of the Rakatan invaders a year ago and the flight of all but one Tho Yor to Furies Gate, outermost planet of the Tythan system, Quan-Jang had led efforts to understand and repair Rakatan technology gathered from their crashed starships. And after a year of experimentation, one Rakata gunship had finally been made operable. With that technology they stood able to do what no Je’daii had done in ten thousand years: breach lightspeed and explore the galaxy beyond.

And Lanoree Brock was set to go with them.

From his tone Quan-Jang made it clear he intended to do whatever was necessary to begin the journey, and soon. Lanoree understood his urgency. The war within the Rakata had fundamentally changed the Je’daii. In addition to opening to the door to the wider galaxy it had opened doors in themselves, not all good. Many Je’daii, led by war hero Daegen Lok, were convinced they needed to embrace the strength and passions traditionally associated with Tython’s dark moon, Bogan. Others eschewed balance in the other direction, favoring the purity associated with the light moon, Ashla.

Exploration of the galaxy beyond the Tythan system was the one thing both sides agreed on, but that could change fast. Quan-Jang wanted to get the mission going before the strife among the Je’daii deepened.



Master Tave turned his small, intense eyes on the two Je'daii rangers standing besides Quan-Jang. "This mission may well take you from Tython forever. You will never see this world. You will never speak to your families. You will likely die among strangers. Have you prepared yourself for that?"

The Twi'lek on Quan-Jang's other shoulder raised his head. "Accepting risk is a part of being a Je'daii, and all of us have faced death during the invasion. Twenty-eight Je'daii have volunteered for this mission. None of us are afraid."

"This is true," said the stout Talid Master Lha-Mi, "But your motivations are particularly strong, aren't they, Hawk Ryo?"

The Twi'lek exhaled and allowed himself to look skyward. Lanoree did too. Of the nine Tho Yor that had sat above Tython for ten thousand years, three had been destroyed by the Rakata. Five had fled to Furies Gate and appeared to wait there, expecting companions to join them in a journey to the stars.

Only one, the largest, remained on Tython. As it hovered over Akar Kesh, Lanoree could feel its strange whispers in the Force. For millennia the Tho Yor had been inscrutably silent, but that had all changed at the end of the Rakatan invasion, when Hawk Ryo's niece Tasha, a young Je'daii seer, had sacrificed her body and infused all nine Tho Yor with her Force-essence. In doing so she'd awakened them; first they'd become weapons that ravaged the Rakata and drove them to retreat. Now the Tho Yor, with pieces of Tasha Ryo inside, stood poised to become guides.

Over the past year all the Je'daii training on this expedition had spent days meditating atop this butte, attuning themselves to the Tho Yor so they might be better guided by it in the journey to come. For Hawk Ryo, communing with the essence of his niece had been easiest, but was also painfully personal.

Hawk took a breath and turned his eyes back to the Masters. "I am determined to see this through. When the Tho Yor left Tython I felt Tasha reach out and beckon me. We were meant to follow. I strongly believe this is the next step the creators of the Tho Yor have planned for us."

"I do as well," added Quan-Jang.

"The mysterious creators," sighed the Cathar Dam-Powl. She'd been Lanoree's teacher and closest friend among the Masters for many years. With Quan-Jang leaving she stood ready to take over research on Anil Kesh. She fixed knowing eyes on Lanoree and said, "You were the second Je'daii after Ranger Hawk to request to join the expedition. Can you speak to your reasons, Ranger Brock?"

Dam-Powl knew Lanoree's reasons and how intensely personal they were. Lanoree's brother Dalien had abandoned his Je'daii training out of an obsession with reaching beyond the Tythan system. Just before the Rakatan invasion, Lanoree had been forced to kill him to prevent him from using an ancient Gree device he believed would activate a hypergate in the ruins of Tython's Old City.

Because Dal couldn't, and because she hoped to understand why he'd died, Lanoree needed to see what lay in the stars beyond.

Just thinking on that was painful. She told the Masters, "Exploring outside the Tythan system will not only tell us about the Rakata and other enemies that might come for us again. It could also lead us to the truth behind our origins. I think the Tho Yor are continuing the next phase of whatever mission they were designed for. We were meant to follow them as much as we were meant to be on Tython."

"Do you think it's the fate of all Je'daii to follow them to the stars?" asked Rajivari, another human Master.

"One day, I think it will be. But for now, the least we can do is mount an exploratory expedition." She added gravity to her tone. "Whatever we learn there could be essential for holding the Je'daii together."

That drew uncomfortable emotions from the Masters. Though they wouldn't say so in a formal setting like this, they all knew the Order was fracturing.

"Another question," said Rajivari, turning his eyes to Quan-Jang. "We know the Rakatan vessels were originally powered by harnessing the darker aspects of the Force. Prisoners were enslaved and tortured, and their agony was used to propel Rakatan warships across the stars."

"I've already explained how we've fixed that," Quan-Jang said. "Through collective meditation we can keep in balance as we travel. We've had no difficulty in test flights."

"Around the Tythan system, yes," said Lha-Mi. "But for a sustained jump through lightspeed? Are you sure our Je'daii can endure that strain?"

Lanoree watched Quan-Jang closely. They'd performed several second-long lightspeed jumps within the Tythan system. The Rakatan machinery was able, but she and the other Je'daii had been wearied by the brief effort.

Quan-Jang, however, confidently said, "All our tests have been successful. I believe our Je'daii will have no problem piloting the ship through sustained journeys."

"On paths led by the Tho Yor." Dam-Powl looked to Hawk Ryo. "Your attunement to the Tho Yor- to your niece- is especially strong. Will you be navigator on this journey?"

"That's my intention," the Twi'lek nodded.

The Masters seemed to retreat into themselves. Lanoree felt the Force pulse between them as they shared feelings and thoughts.

Eventually Master Rajivari said, "The Council sees no reason to delay this mission any further. You have our approval. Go with the Force."

Lanoree felt a swell of satisfaction from Quan-Jang and a deeper determination from Hawk. She wasn't sure what to feel. Glancing upward she tried to think on the Tho Yor, all its mystery and promise. It was easier than thinking about her brother.

Things proceeded quickly after that. The repaired Rakatan gunship, now docked at a station near Anil Kesh, was quickly filled with supplies. Lanoree went to the temple at Bodhi to speak with her parents, who put a brave face on her coming disappearance and didn't mention Dal at all. Then she went to Anil Kesh for final preparations.

She hadn't expected many more goodbyes. A Je'daii ranger's life was a solitary one, which was one of the reasons why she'd chosen it. She was pleased, then, to see Master Dam-Powl awaiting her on the landing pad, beside a cart laden with one large supply crate. The stout old Cathar was

one being Lanoree would miss, and it took effort to restrain herself to a polite bow.

“Thank you for seeing us off, Master, and that you for having faith in our mission.”

“Your path is a dangerous one, and despite Quan-Jang’s assurances I don’t wholly trust that alien monstrosity.” She glanced sideways at the docked vessel. Like most Rakatan ships it had a round central body, with three long angular arms jutting both fore and aft from the sphere’s flanks and topside.

“We’ve run test-flights, Master. We can control it.”

“And if you run into its makers?”

“We’ve used its weapons. And I think the Tho Yor will help us too.”

“Not even Tho Yor are invincible. Some have already been destroyed.”

Lanoree tried a smile. “I was hoping for a more optimistic farewell.”

Dam-Powl sighed. “I’m just voicing my concerns, though I’m sure they’re nothing you haven’t thought of all already. But forget all that. I’ve come here to say goodbye, Lanoree, and to pass on to you one more thing.”

She looked to the sealed crate. “What is it?”

Dam-Powl stepped over to it, removed a metal key from her robe, and unlocked the hatch. She peeled back the lid and the sight took Lanoree’s breath away.

Outwardly it was simple: a metal sphere slightly larger than a human head. There were several ports into which objects could be injected or connected, and no other exterior features.

Lanoree knew it instantly as the device her brother had stolen from a site on Kalimahr, tricked Selkath scientist into repairing, then taken to Tython in hopes of using its dark matter reactor to activate the supposed Gree hypergate in the Old City. This was the reason she’d chased him across the whole Tythan system.

This was what Dal had died for.

She could still remember the long minutes after she’d killed him, when she’d sat beside his cooling body in the ruins of the Old City, staring at that device, just wondering

what would happen if she tried to turn it on. Dam-Powl and the other Masters had said Dal was playing with things beyond understanding; they'd said it might trigger a singularity that would swallow the entire star system.

Lanoree had spent a long time wondering. Sometimes it felt like she'd never left that place.

Seeing the device now brought it all back, even when Dam-Powl slammed the lid shut and locked it tight. Lanoree said, "You want us to take that... *thing* with us? Why?"

"Several reasons. If you're to find its original makers- be they Gree, Kwa, or something else- they will be among the stars, not on Tython. Only they will be able to activate it, or dispose of it safely. Also," she breathed deep, "We believe it is no longer safe to keep this device here."

Lanoree blinked. "We've done everything we could to keep it secret. I even lied to my parents and told them it was destroyed. Only the most elite Masters-"

She stopped herself, finally understanding. The Masters, increasingly split between Ashla and Bogan, no longer trusted each other with the device. If she took it far, far away, neither side would be able to wreak harm with it.

She'd had no idea the schism had gotten that deep or dangerous, and she feared for the planet she'd be leaving behind. Very seriously Lanoree said, "I'll guard it with my life, Master. Does anyone else know about it?"

"No. Not even Ranger Hawk or Quan-Jang. I leave it to you whether to tell them."

Lanoree put a hand on the crate and wondered how many of the Council even knew what Dam-Powl was doing. She wondered if her Master was acting alone.

She wondered if this device- the sole legacy of her brother's tragic life- would doom or save the mission.

"Thank you for trusting me, Master."

Dam-Powl's mouth spread wide, smiled. "I trust no Je'daii more than you, Lanoree. Go with the Force."

She took Lanoree's hand between her paws, squeezed them, then turned and walked away, leaving her key in the human's palm. Lanoree stared at the key, then the sealed crate, wondering.

With effort she pocketed the key, took hold of the cart, and nudged her cargo toward the waiting starship.

Under its former masters, the interior of the Rakatan ship had contained a vaulted chamber filled with glass-capsule containers in which prisoners had been strapped, tortured, and drained of Force-energy. Its new owners had given the place a makeover, but something of that remained. Capsules had been replaced with crash couches onto which Je'daii voluntarily strapped themselves. Modified versions of the original Rakatan headsets were placed on their foreheads to gather the power of the Je'daii's Force-meld.

Save for a handful of rotating crewmembers assigned to watch other parts of the operation, the rest of the twenty-nine Je'daii remained strapped in their beds, powering the ship as it moved through space.

As a ranger, Lanoree had never been good at Force-melds. She had so many things she wanted to keep secret, and it was hard to let her guard down even for the limited level required for the meld. But over the past year she'd learned to do it anyway, and though uncomfortable, she was able to join with the others in directing the Rakatan gunship away from Tython.

They oriented themselves toward Furies Gate, last planet of the system and staging point for the five Tho Yor. None of those were visible at this distance but Lanoree could faintly feel them calling to her, beckoning. At sublight speeds the trip to Furies Gate took over three hundred standard days. With this ship, they stood ready to cross the gap in a dizzying split-second.

They'd run tests before, and Lanoree braced herself for what she knew came next. The collective minds of the Je'daii united toward that single goal. She felt the Force swell around them as the Rakatan ship warmed its lightspeed drive. Energy burst, and they fell out of the universe.

They fall back in immediately. Even strapped to her crash couch Lanoree felt nausea in body and in mind. What they'd done was nothing something living beings were meant to do; it seemed to her that the whole Force groaned in protest.

But they'd done it before, and they'd do it many times again. Lanoree felt they were at Furies Gate now. The five Tho Yor were close by, beckoning. She felt Hawk Ryo's awareness emerge from the meld, individual and strong, and reach out to touch whatever remained of his niece.

Tasha Ryo seemed to touch back. A welcoming warmth spread through the meld, congratulating and encouraging. At the same time she seemed to be tugging them ahead, pulling them toward a specific point in space far beyond the Tythan system. This was the first step in their journey, and Lanoree felt collective thrill and anxiety inside the meld.

That outside presence sent them comfort again and tugged them once more in the new direction. Hawk Ryo accepted the instruction and led the other Je'daii in reorienting their ship.

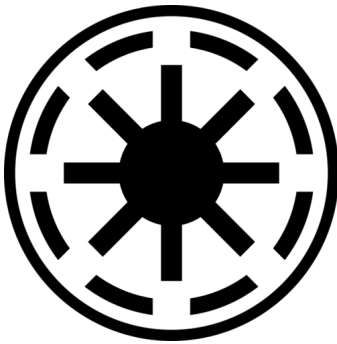
The Tho Yor touched them once more, beckoning, and with a wink they were gone, vanished into lightspeed, propelled by whatever unimaginable power moved them.

The Je'daii had no choice but to follow. Hawk gave them a collective moment to brace themselves, then urged them forward. They plunged ahead, leaping out of the Tythan system and out of the universe itself, leaving everything they'd known behind.





# PART I



# KEYS TO ASCENSION



## Chapter One

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At nearly three thousand meters from prow to stern, protected by layered shields and bristling with turbolaser turrets and concussion missile launchers, the star destroyer *Alliance* was as potent as any warship in the galaxy. Taken alone, it would have caused an attacking fleet to slow in caution. Together with its surrounding flotilla- nine Mon Calamari warships of varying classes, plus a dozen smaller support vessels- it was the centerpiece of a formidable fighting force.

Anj Dahl knew that, but as she angled her Crossfire to view *Alliance*, a pale wedge against a backdrop of faint stars, the mighty flagship seemed small, lonely, and vulnerable.

“Stop projecting,” she muttered to herself. That kind of thinking got them nowhere.

“What’s that, Rogue Leader?” a voice scratched her helmet comlink.

“Nothing, Two.” Anj restrained a sigh.

She checked her scanners: Rogues Two, Three, and Four were still behind her, keeping the perfect diamond formation they’d held for the past hour as they’d flown a lazy patrol loop around the fleet. *Alliance* and its support vessels were hanging in empty space, dozens of light-years from any star system, inhabited or otherwise. The nice thing about space was that it was so damned big, all you had to do to hide was sit in the middle of it. The downside was that it was easy to feel lost, directionless.

With their patrol complete, Anj and her wingmates had only one direction to go. "Let's pack it for home, Rogues," she called, and gently added more power to engines.

Their S-foils already locked in a horizontal position, the four Crossfires began a steady dive toward *Alliance*. As they got closer they could plainly see the gold phoenix crests emblazoned on either flank of the big white destroyer. Anj still remembered the frenzied battle at the Mon Calamari shipyards in which they'd stolen the brand-new, top-of-the-line ship from the Imperials. It had been Admiral Stazi's first great victory in the war against Krayt, and just thinking on it brought the warm glow of nostalgia.

Things were much more complicated nowadays. It had been mere days since the fleet had jumped away from Bakura. The Imperials had arrested the admiral before anyone knew what was going on, and the Alliance fleet, which had made up the bulk of the forces liberating the planet from the Ssi-Ruuk, had been forced to make a terrible choice: fight to free their captured leader or acquiesce, in effect surrendering Stazi to whatever fake arguments the Imperials would use to blame him for the murder of Marasiah Fel.

Instead Admiral Jhoram Bey had elected a third option. He'd pulled his ships away from Bakura and jumped them to parts unknown, leaving freshly-proclaimed Regent Hogrum Chalk with a powerful and potentially hostile fleet lurking somewhere among the stars.

The hope was that uncertainty would debilitate Chalk; all Anj knew was that it gnawed at her pilots too. As their four Crossfires pulled into the ventral hangar another flight set out for patrol. The deck was mostly quiet, and a minimal deck crew shepherded the four starfighters into their berths.

It was mere morning shipboard time, and her other pilots were ready to stretch, exercise, eat, and drink, in that order. Anj envied them their freedom; she was more than a fighter jock nowadays, so after changing from flight suit to uniform-standard Alliance blues, not any of the drab gray Imp stuff Coruscant had tried to force on them- she made her way up to *Alliance's* command section.

Over a decade back, Admiral Stazi had made his legendary fighting retreat from Caamas, keeping the spirit of the

Alliance alive even after the crushing defeat of its fleets and the surrender of its government. Anj had been just a rookie pilot then, not even out of her teens, but she could still remember the terror and thrill of that battle, and the strange high that had followed escape. The entire galaxy had turned against them but that small handful of soldiers was alive to proudly carry the Alliance's fire. Despite the odds against them and the brutal slog to come, they'd felt united in their common goal.

Things were different after their flight from Bakura. It wasn't just that Anj was older now, and a commander to boot. As she walked down *Alliance's* halls she saw the quiet confusion on the faces of every being she passed. Unlike after Caamas, nobody knew what their end goal was, where the next fight would be, or whether they'd fight at all. And as much as she admired and respected Jhoram Bey, she had to admit he was no Gar Stazi.

When she reached the bridge, Anj exchanged salutes with the flagship's captain, the humorless but effective Captain Ona Antilles. Antilles directed her to the command salon at the rear of the bridge, and when she stepped into the separate chamber she found exactly what she's expected: Jhoram Bey, thick arms locked over his chest, staring down at a holo projected from the salon's central table.

She gave another salute and said, "Reporting on schedule, Admiral."

The Weequay glanced at his wrist chronometer. "Two minutes late, actually."

"Sorry, sir. Guess I took too long getting changed."

"At ease. It's not like we're pressed for time."

Anj lowered her hand. Bey flexed broad shoulders like he wasn't entirely comfortable with the uniform they were in. Stazi's longtime friend and right hand, Jaius Yorub, had died in the battle to capture this ship, and the admiral would have died too if Jhoram hadn't punched him in the jaw and literally dragged him into the cockpit of his Crossfire. As both reward and punishment, Stazi had promoted Jhoram from Rogue Leader to *Alliance's* commanding officer, which had in turn gotten Anj booted up from Rogue Five to Rogue Leader. She was fighter jockey at heart, no lover of rank or

responsibility, but she knew all the weight she'd gathered on her shoulders were nothing compared to what her past and present commanding officer had on his. Though he'd never say it aloud, she bet Jhoram wanted nothing more than to tear off his rank badge and careen about in a Crossfire again.

"Well," Anj said, turning her attention to the holos at waist-level. "What's the news for today?"

"Things are getting a little clearer on Coruscant," Jhoram said. With a tap on the table's controls he brought up an image of an unlovely Snivvian newscaster reporting against a backdrop of Galactic City's skyline.

"Regent Chalk has confirmed today that he will be holding a public trial of former Alliance Admiral Gar Stazi, as well as Senators Nelloran and Kaige, and three unnamed individuals that government says are directly or indirectly involved with the murder of Empress Fel. Regent Chalk insisted the trial will be presented fairly, in public view, and welcomed all legal scrutiny from the senate, while also warning strongly that violent protest will be harshly punished. Speaker Tem Brighton, a longtime ally of the accused, has promised a thorough legal defense, and peaceful protests.

"In his statement, Regent Chalk also reiterated his call for fugitive Senator Porat Derrol to surrender himself for trial. He has also increased the reward for the senator's capture by another twenty-five percent.

"Finally, the memorial ceremony for Empress Fel will be held this afternoon at fourteen hundred hours, Galactic Standard Time. Speaker Brighton had confirmed that he *will* be present at the memorial. The Jedi Order will also be sending its members to the ceremony, and we've just learned the president of the Hapan Republic will be arriving soon. We'd like to remind our audience that Empress Fel's mother, Elliah Chalk, and the current regent were both born in the Hapes Cluster, to a then-noble family..."

"About what I expected," Anj said after Jhoram paused the recording. "What are they saying about *us*?"

"Very little, even unofficially. I'm guessing Chalk has given the news-nets a polite but firm message *not* to remind their audience we're out here and liable to cause trouble."

"Is that what we aim to do? Cause trouble?"

“Our aim is to secure the release of Stazi and the others from Chalk’s trumped-up charges.”

“I know,” Anj let her voice go soft. “But really, sir, what can we do, specifically? It sounds like Brighton’s legal team is the best chance they have of stopping this thing.”

“Chalk would never have arrested the admiral if he hadn’t concocted an airtight case.”

*The admiral.* Jhoram always referred to Stazi like that, as if he wasn’t an admiral himself. His rough Weequay face hid how overwhelmed he felt from most beings, but not from her.

“Do you think it’s possible,” she ventured, “That some of the other senators *were* in on it? They’ve published those images of Stazi meeting with Derrol-”

“Yes, the admiral and a senator, sulking in a dark alley,” Jhoram shook his head. “I’d still wager those were fakes, and not the last bit of false evidence Chalk’s cooked up. No, he’ll use this to purge his enemies. He’d not the kind of man who lets any crisis go to waste.”

Anj frowned. “If that’s the case, why is Brighton still in office? And why didn’t he arrest Monia?”

Monia Gahan was another ex-Rogue. Niece of a late Alliance triumvir, she’d gotten out of the military and into politics, which was a new kind of fighting and just as fierce lately. Monia had been at the fore of the senators nosily- but so far peaceably- denouncing Chalk’s actions.

“Chalk is a smart one,” Jhoram said. “The senate, and all those Alliance senators, are here to stay. He knows that. He can’t destroy the body his niece fought so hard to make, but he can neuter it. Tame it. If he plays his cards right he can cast Brighton, Monia, and the others as terrorist sympathizers, even accessories to regicide. And though I hate to say it, we may have helped his hand.”

“How so?”

“With us in limbo, the Alliance presence in the Federation fleet is down to a sliver. Admiral Slossar seems to be obeying Chalk’s orders and keeping his ships in the Outer Rim, cleaning up the last of the Ssi-Ruuk. He doesn’t want to do anything that would spark a full-on insurrection, especially since he knows he can’t win.”

Anj understood Jhoram was talking about himself as much as the Sluissi admiral. "Have you made any contact with him?"

"No. I don't want to give away anything yet. Our position, our plans..."

*What plans?* Anj wanted to ask, but held herself.

Jhoram's eyes darted from the table to her. "You've thought about contacting Monia, haven't you?"

Anj didn't deny it. As a part-time commando unit, Rogue Squadron had used a special encrypted frequency recorded only in the heads of its members. It had proven useful in unlikely ways, including making contact with Hondo Karr's rogue Mandalorians last year.

Anj might be able to call her old squadmate on that freq. Maybe it would get past Hogrum Chalk's surveillance, which was sure to be focused on Monia right now. Maybe it would get caught.

Honestly she said, "It doesn't seem worth the risk yet."

"Keep silent for now," Jhoram nodded. "We need to wait. Consider our options."

Anj waited. When he said nothing else she asked, "What are our options, sir?"

Jhoram snorted, amused at her bluntness. "Right now we're a sword, dangling over Chalk's head, in a place he can't see. We'll keep him distracted. He'll waste resources trying to find us."

"And if he *does* find Stazi guilty? If he tries to execute him?"

Jhoram's face darkened. "We have a fleet. I'm prepared to use it to save the admiral."

"We'd start another civil war if we did that. And the odds would be against us almost as bad as they were ten years ago. Maybe worse, since the Jedi and Imperial Knights can't help us."

"Most of the citizens in this galaxy support democratic values, *Alliance* values. The senate elections show that. It's why Chalk and the Imperials are on the defensive. We've scared them and now they're lashing out, trying to seize total power while they have any power at all."



It was an accurate enough summation, but it didn't make Anj feel any better. "So we hold on. We wait and watch."

"That's right," Jhoram said. "And if it comes to it... be ready to strike. Any time, any place."

He tapped the table again and the frozen news broadcast was replaced by a galactic map, marking out the placement of Imperial warships across the galaxy per *Alliance's* last sync with the Federation database just says ago, before the attack on Bakura. They'd been cut out of all central systems since, of course, but it still painted a grim picture. *Alliance's* battle group, floating on the edge of uncharted space, was just a tiny green dot against a sprawl of Imperial red.

Brave fighters had overcome seemingly-insurmountable odds before. A century and a half back, the Rebel Alliance had toppled Palpatine's Empire. A decade ago they'd toppled Krayt's. This time the battle lines were blurrier. Every action was constrained by great risk. And as she'd told Jhoram, this time there were no Jedi Knights to lead the charge with blazing swords and righteous wisdom.

With the Force gone silent, the Sith eradicated and the Jedi just helpless monks, the fate of the galaxy was in the hands of normal beings now. Anj suddenly found herself wishing for the days when conflicts were started and ended by higher powers. At least then there was always somebody else to blame. Now everything- the weight of decision, the hinge of fate- was on them alone.

With two long thin horns jutting a straight half-meter from the crown of his skull, a Chagrian male was an easy thing to spot amidst a mixed-species crowd. Unlike other cranial appendages- a Twi'lek's lekku, say, or a Gotal's more modest horns- a Chagrian's couldn't be obscured by a hooded cloak or well-placed hat. Those tall straight horns were like a declaration, one Chagrian men usually wore with pride, but they did no favors when trying to avoid attention.

Fortunately, Chagrian females were not so handicapped.

Porat Derrol- former war hero, former senator, now fugitive- had thrown on a drab tunic and painted a slashing scar-mark across his face in order to assume the airs of a roughneck spacer, but not everyone on the packed pedestrian

streets of Recopia's main spaceport town was convinced. Trailing fifty meters behind him, her horn-less scalp and low-hanging lethorns obscured by a black hood, Saarai watched her husband's prominent horns peaking above the surrounding heads, and she watched the other watchers. She marked two of them, staggered apart and covering the left and right-hand sides of the street. They would shift position in the crowd and alternate positions, one getting close to Porat and the other hanging behind.

It was a fairly standard method of trailing a target, and Saarai couldn't tell who or what they were. Maybe Imperial spies, maybe bounty hunters, maybe amateurs. Maybe even Sith agents, though from all she'd heard Nihl was dead and his forces ravaged. Over the past few days, Hogrum Chalk had made it known galaxy-wide that he wanted Senator Derrol and was willing to pay for him.

They were lucky to have gotten off Coruscant at all. Saarai and her husband had been bracing for radical action ever since Darth Havok had accosted Porat in the senate apartment parking garage. Porat had landed a few shots on him as he'd fled but Havok's ultimate fate was unknown, and they both knew that if the Sith had been captured by the empress' people, Saarai's past was no longer secret.

Then two Imperial Knights had come to Porat's office to ask probing questions. As soon as they'd left, Porat had combed his wife, telling her to prep their things and get ready to leave Coruscant. Even then, they'd never imagined what would come next: the empress assassinated, half the senior Alliance officials rounded up as her killers. They still weren't sure how all the pieces fit together. They only knew they were lucky to have gotten that warning; otherwise Porat would be in the same prison cell as Stazi.

And Saarai, she knew, would be in the same place as Darth Havok, which was surely worse.

After fleeing Coruscant they'd stopped on Recopia's spaceport to access funds Porat kept at a private bank here. Now they were heading back to their ship, but first they had to deal with their tails. Following well behind her husband and his enemies, watching them all, Saarai slipped a hand beneath her hood, tapped her earpiece, and whispered, "I see

two following you. You're going to have to find a place to lose them."

"It's crowded here," Porat whispered back. "There's not many places they could act."

"They'll follow you all the way back to the ship if you let them. You need to lure them someplace secluded."

From a distance, she watched her husband's horns swing slightly to the right. "I see a place. Be ready."

Saarai watched as Porat's horns veered rightward, then dipped slightly to fit through a doorway beneath a sign marking a public refresher. Saarai moved to the left side of the street and watched through the crowd as one of Porat's tailers- a brown-haired human- slowed and turned for the 'fresher, while the second- a blue-skinned Pantoran- kept walking. The Pantoran slowed once he passed the building, stopped in the middle of the street, made a show of confusion, then moved to the left side of the street. He leaned against the side of the building facing the outhouse and took out his datapad, as though checking it for directions. Nobody seemed to pay him attention except Saarai.

She tapped her comm on again. "Watch the human, brown-hair. I'll take care of the one outside."

The Pantoran was watching the outhouse while pretending to watch his datapad, and he didn't notice Saarai at all until she slipped beside him and nudged him in the shoulder. She immediately bounced off him and offered apologies. The Pantoran grunted that she should watch where she was going. He apparently hadn't felt her needle pierce the fabric of his trousers and enter his thigh. The sedative inside was designed to render humans unconscious in less than a minute, and she imagined it would work just as well for a Pantoran.

Saarai crossed the street, maneuvering around the crowd until she reached the outhouse. Instead of going in she whispered, "Outside is clear."

Porat made no reply, which could have meant he was in trouble, or that he was being closely watched. This was one of those times when Saarai wished she could touch the Force again. For all its drawbacks, it could be such a useful tool.

She released breath when Porat exited the restroom and began walking for the spaceport, paying her no attention. A

second later the brown-haired human came out as well and made a causal turn to follow the Chagrian. As he moved into the crowd Saarai fell in behind him, nudged him in the back, and slipped another needle in.

The human acted more alarmed than his partner. After Saarai slipped back, losing herself in the crowd, she turned again to see the human standing, looking around, either for his partner or the one who'd just knocked him.

She whispered to her husband, "Second gift delivered. We should have a talk with him."

"Agreed," Porat said in her ear. "Can you detain him?"

"I think so."

She watched and waited for a long minute. The human walked through the crowd, looking for the blue head of his partner who was now slumped unconscious on the side of the street. Saarai edged closer, and when she saw the human stagger from the drug, she rushed him from the side.

"It's okay, sir," she said, "I've got you."

"What-" the human moaned, "Was it you?"

"A little early for so much ale, sir," she said, loud enough to be heard as she maneuvered the man into a side alley next to the outhouse. She barely got him off the street before his legs totally gave out under him.

"Ah, stang..." the man groaned as she pushed him against the wall. "Can't feel my legs... my arms..."

"Who are you working for?" she asked as she pinned both his shoulders to the ferrocrete.

The man blinked fiercely. "Not of your karking business."

"I think it is." She edged the hood of her cloak back to reveal some of her face and the blue lethorns that draped over her shoulders.

Even drugged, the man's eyes widened in recognition. "You... We thought... you were at the ship..."

"Chalk's agents would never be as sloppy as you and your friend. You're bounty hunters, aren't you?"

The man made a growling noise in the back of his throat, which was all the confirmation she needed.

A shadow fell over them both, and Saarai looked up to see Porat leaning over them. He crouched down beside her and put a flat hand against the human's chest.

"Amateurs," she told him. "We got lucky."

"Not so lucky," Porat said darkly. "How did you know to look for us here?"

The man blinked furiously as he struggled to stay away. Porat slapped his cheek, not too hard, and asked, "Are there more than two of you? Is anyone waiting for us at the spaceport?"

The man's lips trembled. Breath puffed between them. Finally he said, "Should've... never taken... job..."

Finally his head rolled to one side and slumped forward. He was out. They'd gotten nothing useful from him.

"Now what?" Saarai asked.

"Now we get to the port and get off this planet."

"And him?" She looked at the pathetic face of the one who would have handed them over to their enemies. Her hand went into her cloak and found the blaster hidden there.

"Let him be. We'll be long gone by the time he wakes up."

Mercy was not a trait she'd been raised with. She'd learned it late, and she'd learned it from Porat. Her father, the last Darth Wyyrlok, would have scorned her for what she was doing now. But her father was dead, and so was the Force that had given him his dark power. It was a brand new galaxy, by her counts neither better nor worse than what had become before, but the rules were different. She was different.

Saarai released her blaster and stood up. Porat did too. "Let's get out of here," she said.

They hurried together out of the alley and into the street. Saarai dipped back once again to watch her husband's back for tailers but they seemed to be clear this time. They ran into no problems in the spaceport, and fifteen minutes after leaving the alley their spacecraft, a compact civilian-model Incom scout, kicked off from Recopia's surface and climbed through its atmosphere.

"Where do we go now?" Saarai asked as they shuddered through escape velocity.

Hands tight on the control yoke, Porat said, "We need to get further from the Core."

"Champala?" The Chagrian homeworld was about the only place their kind wouldn't stand out.

Porat shook his head. "Chalk will be watching there." After they escaped the atmosphere and sailed through Recopia's lower orbit, he brought up the navcomputer. "I was thinking Aphran IV."

She frowned. "What's on Aphran IV?"

"Not much, except for one person. Samine Doklus."

"Should that be familiar to me?"

"No, but her husband Tantor was with my unit during the war." He looked at her deliberately. "Tantor is still stationed on the *Alliance*."

She understood now, and should have from the start. "You want to meet up with Admiral Bey's fleet."

"Yes. Samine's a civilian, but I know Tantor taught her a few tricks for covert communications. She should know a way to contact her husband, wherever he is, and I don't think Chalk's people will be watching her, not on Aphran IV."

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"It's where we belong."

He said it with such conviction. She'd been a fool to think her husband would ever lay low and prioritize his own safety during a time of crisis. It was his earnest devotion to the Alliance and its principles that had drawn her to him at the start, though not in the way it did now.

After the murder of her father, the death of Darth Krayt and the defeat of the One Sith, Saara had been alone in the galaxy, with no strength to draw on except the dark side of the Force. She'd fallen in with a group of Chagrians refugees because it was the best place to be anonymous, and it was from then that she'd first heard about Porat Derrol, an infantry commander under Admiral Stazi who aimed to turn his war hero clout into a political career with the then-hypothetical Federation senate. For all that, and his activity in refugee relief operations, he was already a local celebrity on Champala.

Because grief and the dark side had clouded her mind in those days, she'd been looking for opportunities for revenge, and Porat had presented a unique one. In seducing him, she'd thought, she could rise by his side and subtly enact her vengeance against the scattered One Sith and Empress Fel.

She was young and attractive; he was ambitious. She'd thought they could use each other well.

Things had started going awry even before Darth Maladi's plague swept the galaxy. To her surprise, Porat had demonstrated not just political cunning but a genuine Alliance patriotism, a commitment to freedom and democracy and all those other loft abstractions Sith always sneered at. At first she'd sneered at him too, behind his back, but as time went on she saw that his idealism in no way negated his intelligence. Instead it propelled him to greater heights. She'd started having doubts and felt ashamed of them.

And then the Force had disappeared.

To the vast majority of the galaxy, the sudden silence in the Force was a scrap on the news-nets and nothing more. To her it had upended everything. All the convictions she'd clung to, all the emotions that had empowered her, evaporated like dew under hot sun. Freed from the shackles of the Force, she'd finally admitted to herself that she'd fallen in love with her husband. And, after a month of manic self-doubt, she'd admitted to Porat what she was.

She'd told him all of it, fully expecting him to throw her to the authorities, but he hadn't. He'd stood with her when all the galaxy seemed arrayed against her.

"If we do make contact with *Alliance*," Porat told her now, as they sat temporarily safe in his shuttle's cockpit. "You don't have to come with me. I can join Bey and you can stay with Samine, where it's safe."

"No," she shook her head and took his hand. "We're in this together. Always."

Porat nodded; she could see the affection in his eyes, and the pride. He'd stood with her, so she'd stay with him. Love bred power like the Sith had never known. In losing the Force, Saarai had gained more than she'd ever thought possible.

## Chapter Two

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There were two suns shining faint in Rohakalla's sky, one blue, the other white. Together they cast the planet's surface in a strange double-light, one that reminded Cade Skywalker of nothing more than the spectral gleam of a Force ghost. It did nothing to soothe his nerves, but it felt appropriate given what this planet was and what it meant, which he was only now beginning to understand.

The standoff which Cade, his allies, and his reluctant partners had wandered into had thankfully dissipated. When they'd gotten close to the ancient alien hypergate, that towering stone arch that promised instant passage to the heart of the galaxy, Yuuzhan Vong had emerged from the surrounding cliff-walls trapped them under threat of violence. Then their captors had been joined by one more Yuuzhan Vong, familiar to Cade yet changed, and a small group of robed aliens belonging to no species he had ever seen.

Once Cade had explained who he was and what he'd wanted, Khat Lah had ordered his Yuuzhan Vong warriors to stand down. The blue-skinned, saurian aliens had likewise relaxed their guard and even offered help. Right now one of them was aboard Cade's *Mynock*, perched on the cliff-edge above, lending some arcane Force-based healing powers to Imperial Knight Jao Assam, who'd taken a very nasty lightsaber wound to the gut.

Even as he stood in the shadow of the arch with Khat Lah, Cade kept glancing back at the ones responsible. These Yuuzhan Vong had relaxed their guard around *Mynock's*



crew, but they remained close to the two Sith who'd become entangled with Cade's quest on Tython. Darth Talon kept watching Cade like he watched her, with constant suspicion. He figured they had less to worry about with Eli Horn. The teenage apprentice, bereft of the scarlet-and-black tattoos of his master, looked lost and helpless like a panthac cub without its parent. Of course, Eli was the one who'd nearly killed Jao, so it was good to keep an eye on him.

Khat Lah was eying the Sith too. "I'm surprised you've brought them with you," the Yuuzhan Vong said.

"That wasn't part of the plan," Cade told him as they stood beneath the towering, empty arch. "They're more like hangers-on. But I've got them under control."

"The young human... what is his name?"

No sense hiding it. "Eli Horn. You knew his dad, right?"

Khat Lah's eyes bore into the distance. "Yes. I owe him... everything."

"I figured that. You were using his name while you were running around the galaxy, trying to fix up this thing. Did you have any idea the kind of crowd his son fell in with?"

"No. It never occurred to me..." The Yuuzhan Vong trailed off. His face was hard to read but in the Force Khat Lah's emotion was clear. He was feeling guilty.

"The kid made his own choice," Cade said. "And, hell... everybody makes mistakes." He'd done his own spell in company of the Sith. He'd snapped out of it faster than the Horn kid, though.

"Still," said Khat Lah, "I made a promise to his father. To the memory of Reikar Horn."

"I get it. I do."

Cade examined that face. It had the features typical of Yuuzhan Vong- sloping forehead, thin lips, flat nostrils- but it lacked the tattoos or scarring the surrounding warriors bore. Cade vaguely remembered that Khat Lah had belonged to the Ganner sect, a group of warriors who'd idolized the Jedi.

Well, Khat Lah seemed to have surpassed his idols now. The Yuuzhan Vong had gained connection with the Force a decade ago, during the Sith-Imperial war. Cade still wasn't sure how it worked, but it seemed to have had something to do with the fact that Khat Lah had been with Cade's

grandmother, Jade Skywalker, when she died. Cade remembered her as a small, gentle woman but she'd had immense native Force-power, and in her dying moments she'd become a blazing nova felt across the galaxy. As he felt the Yuuzhan Vong's Force-aura now he picked up something that faintly recalled his grandmother's. It was like a memory of a memory.

What really bothered him about Khat Lah, though, was the fact that he looked around a decade older than he should have. Cade had last seen him a decade ago, and not for very long, but he'd been a tall, strong warrior in his prime. He still looked big and tough enough to win any fight, but his face had grown leathery and his long hair was more gray than black.

Cade had never been one to beat around any bush, so he came out and asked it. "The years don't look to have been very nice to you," he told Khat Lah. "Or is there some other reason you so much older than the last time we met?"

The Yuuzhan Vong lifted his eyes to the tall arch. "Time... is different on the other side of the gate."

"You mean faster?"

A moment passed. Then he said, "Usually."

Cade hadn't spent a year chasing phantoms across the galaxy to settle for cryptic answers. "What's on the other side of the gate? What *exactly*? And why did you put so much damn effort in getting there?"

"You said you spoke with Tasha Ryo."

"I wouldn't say 'spoke with,' but yeah, we talked."

It had been more like some surreal melding of minds. When Cade had stepped inside the Tho Yor, that ancient ark half-buried in a Tython snowfield, he'd made contact with the consciousness of a Twi'lek Je'daii, held within the Tho Yor for millennia. She'd been the one to show him the way to Rohakalla, as she had to Khat Lah before him.

That still didn't mean he understood any of it. His experience inside the Tho Yor was like a fever dream, and his memories were fading every minute.

"The hypergate leads to a place of... immense Force power," Khat Lah said. "A world located so close to the center of the galaxy that it is unreachable by starship."

Cade gave another look around the canyon floor. Everyone he could see, he could feel in the Force. That went for the Sith, his friends Jariah and Deliah, even the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, which should have been impossible. Of course, Khat Lah should have been impossible too.

"This world," he said, "Can it give anyone a connection with the Force?"

"Yes. I believe so."

Cade glanced at the Sith again. "Well, we've got some people who'd love to go through and get their powers re-activated. And a lot more around the galaxy."

"It is not that simple," Khat Lah hissed. "You have no idea of the power of that place."

"Then explain it to me. You've clearly spent a lot of time there."

Khat Lah seemed to hesitate; Cade was about to press when a prissy mechanical voice sounded behind him. "Good news, Master Cade! Master Jao's serious injuries have been taken care of! He is now resting comfortably aboard *Mynock* and should be fully operational within a standard day."

Cade and Khat Lah both turned to see C-3PO shuffling toward them. Rohakalla's cold double-glow took the warmth off his golden plates, but brought out the colors on the blue-and-white astromech rolling beside him. R2-D2 gave a happy tweet, agreeing with the protocol droid's statement.

That was a relief, but Cade was more interested to talk to the ones coming in behind the droids. The towering Wookiee Lowbacca was a Master a century and a half old, as knowledgeable as any Jedi when it came to the Force, but he guessed the robed, blue-skinned alien walking beside him would know even more.

He just hoped they'd come out any way it instead of being evasive and cryptic. He'd had enough of that.

"Your machine is correct," the alien said in slow, accented Basic. "A day is all your friend should require before being fully healed."

"Thanks for your help," Cade said. "It means a lot."

"It was A'Yevek who healed him. I am E'Lorem." The alien reached up with three-clawed hands and pulled the hood of its robe. The revealed face had reptilian eyes with

vertical slits, forward-facing on a short-snouted face. A long thick neck connected head to shoulders, and though the rest of the body was hidden in robes, Cade could tell from their movements that they walked on long-boned, reverse-articulated legs.

"I'd like to hear what you guys are all about," said Cade. "How long you've been watching over that hypergate, and why."

"I already told you, Skywalker," said Khat Lah. "They have been protecting it for eons, since before our civilizations existed."

"You speak pretty good Basic for somebody who's been in hiding for fifty thousand years," Cade told E'Lorem.

"Most of our kind cannot. I am... an interlocutor. From time to time, outsiders have found this place and come to us seeking wisdom."

Cade crossed his arms. "When was the last time you got a visitor?"

"A Jedi Master came to us," E'Lorem's eyes narrowed. "Nearly... two hundred of your years ago."

Cade exhaled, and Lowbacca gave a moan. He translated, "Don't suppose it was a big furry guy with tusks?"

"It was a human."

"Then it wasn't anybody we know." Cade gestured to the gate. "Seriously, this gate's been out of service for what, a thousand years?"

"Far longer than that," said E'Lorem.

"And you've been babysitting brokedown hardware for all that time?"

"We are the keepers of the Whills," the alien said with utmost dignity. "Protecting this place is our only purpose. Its power cannot be allowed to fall into the wrong hands."

"And what is a 'whill' exactly? I've heard that before." From Tasha Ryo, inside the Tho Yor.

"A Whill is a being that has become one with the Force and guides it flow."

"You mean they died?"

"No. Their connection with the Force was so strong that they dissolved their mortal bodies willingly. It is skill that has been lost for millennia, but was mastered by the beings

you call Celestials. Their wills remain as a guiding hand that touches the Living Force.”

“And they’re on the other side of the gate?”

E’Lorem and Khat Lah exchanged looks. The Yuuzhan Vong said, “The Whills are nowhere. They have no physical bodies, no location.”

“But you’re their *keepers*. How do you keep something that doesn’t exist?” Cade was starting to feel like a kid left behind in class. He asked Lowbacca, “Do you have any idea what the kark they’re on about?”

The Wookiee gave a frustrated roar and shook his head.

“Through the gate is what they left behind,” said E’Lorem. “Their power still echoes in that place.”

“So what, they used to live there?”

E’Lorem and Khat Lah shared looks again. Khat Lah asked, “You’ve been to Zonama Sekot, haven’t you?”

“A couple times. As a kid.”

“Did you ever speak with Sekot itself?”

The consciousness which governed the planet was said to appear as a specter that looked as lifelike as any real being. According to his father, who’d grown up on Zonama and spoke with Sekot several times, the planet liked the manifest itself in the forms of Jedi it had met in the past. A child version of Anakin Skywalker was apparently its favorite, and Cade was glad not to have to had to look into a young Vader’s eyes.

“I never met it,” he admitted. “What does Zonama Sekot have to do with this place?”

“Have you ever wondered why, in all the galaxy, there is only on planet on which a singular collective awareness has arisen from the Force?”

He hadn’t, not really. Zonama Sekot had been a fascination of his father, but it had never been a big part of his life. He’d had plenty other problems to grapple with.

“I don’t know,” Cade admitted. “I never gave it much thought.”

Lowbacca gave a series of grunts and growls, and C-3PO said, “Master Lowbacca suggests that Zonama Sekot is unique, given its extragalactic origin and the fact that it was a seed of the original Yuuzhan Vong homeworld.”

"Zonama is special," Khat Lah agreed, "But that never answered the question. Why did no planets native to this galaxy develop a consciousness?"

"We give up." Cade spread his arms. "Why?"

"The answer is simple. They did."

Cade found his eyes drawn toward the gate. "And one of *those* is on the other side?"

"No," said E'Lorem. "On the other side is the world left behind when the planetary consciousness became so powerful it could ascend to join the Cosmic Force and become a Whill. The transformation was so great that sparks of its essence linger there, still."

"It is not the only such world to find consciousness," Khat Lah added. "Many planets the Jedi consider Force-strong were on the path to attaining it. Tython was close, but the world was ravaged by the schism in the Je'daii order."

"The one that made those guys?" Cade threw a glare at the Sith. Khat Lah nodded.

It was a lot to take in. It made Cade feel small and confused and powerless and *way* out of his depth. He hated that feeling, even though he should have been used to it by now.

Lowbacca roared, and C-3PO said, "We would like to see what lies beyond the gate ourselves."

"I understand the desire to regain the Force," said Khat Lah. "But the other side of the gate is dangerous in ways you can't understand."

"We'll understand if you take us," Cade said. They still looked hesitant, and he asked, "When you took your Yuuzhan Vong buddies to the other side of the gate, did you know what would happen to them?"

"I did not, and it has taken them a long time to learn to control their power. Some," he added darkly, "did not survive."

It was that kind of danger, then. Of course it would be.

To Cade's surprise, E'Lorem said, "I believe a Skywalker would be able to handle the risks."

"What do you know about Skywalkers?"

Those reptilian eyes looked at him, just looked. E'Lorem said nothing.

Lowbacca roared and Cade said, "He's right. Lowbacca used to be Grand Master of the *grancha* Jedi Order. If you can trust anybody on the other side of the gate, it's this guy. Way more than me." The way they were talking about it, he wasn't sure he wanted to go through.

"We must speak with the other keepers to decide who may be allowed through," E'Lorem said. "Until then, we will guard the gate against all trespassers." He lifted a clawed hand toward the Sith. "Especially them."

"You'll get no argument from me there," Cade breathed. "But you've gotta understand... Outside of this planet there's only a couple people in the whole galaxy that can use the Force. Hundreds of Jedi and Imperial Knights, plus tons of other Force-users schools... They're all gonna want a piece of this."

"That is why it must be guarded," said E'Lorem gravely.

At that moment Cade finally understood a little about these keepers of the Whills. For thousands of years and thousands of generations they must have stood watch on this lonely forgotten world, watching the forgotten gate that didn't even work, all on the believe that one day some of them would be called to protect it. Now that day had finally come. This was their time to fulfill their destinies, the legacy they'd inherited. He couldn't blame them for taking their job seriously.

Lowbacca, always quicker on the uptake, growled respectfully, and C-3PO translated, "We of course understand that you must take your time and deliberate. We will be happy to grant any assistance as you make your decision."

R2-D2 whistled affirmative and rocked on his two legs.

E'Lorem said, "It has been nearly two centuries since we received Jedi visitors. Khat Lah has explained to us much of what has passed..."

"But my perspective is different from yours, and limited," the Yuuzhan Vong allowed.

Lowbacca roared, and C-3PO said, "Master Lowbacca experienced first-hand much of the drama that had affected the galaxy for the past century and a half. He would be happy to tell you his tale. I, of course, would be on hand to translate." The droid's photoreceptors flickered slightly as he focused on E'Lorem. "If I may presume, are you not a

member of species known in our records as the Kwa?"

The saurian dipped his head in a nod. "You call us that."

"Oh my, how exciting!" C-3PO said with sudden verve. "Why, the common consensus among modern scholars is that your kind is extinct! Some researchers trace a connection between your race and the Blue Mountain People on Dathomir, but that is considered speculative by most in the field. I believe there have also been attempts to link your civilization to the lost ruins on Salin and Vandyne and even Dantooine, though the last example is considered far-fetched by all but the most fringe scholars. In fact, according to my databanks--"

"Threepio," Cade said, but the droid changed tack instead of slowing down.

"Did you know, after nearly two centuries of service I had my first opportunity to converse with a member of the Gree race, just a year ago? As I'm sure you know, their civilization is just as ancient as yours, and marginally more extant. The version of their language included in my translation database proved quite helpful in the task."

"*Threepio*," Cade sighed, then had an idea. "I don't suppose you've got any Kwa in you, do you?"

"My database does in fact contain material on the Kwa language as partially reconstructed by xenoarchaeologists working in the Quelli sector." The droid turned to face E'Lorem and released a series of very alien-sounding hisses from his vocoder.

The Kwa's slit-pupils widened in surprise, the first real emotion Cade had seen him show. He opened his mouth and gave his own series of hisses, to which C-3PO replied with some more.

"Oh, thank the maker!" the droid warbled, "My translation database is more thorough than I'd ever imagined!" Beside him, R2-D2 chirped happily.

Watching them, an idea came to Cade that should have been obvious. Placing a hand on R2's dome, he looked to E'Lorem and said, "You want somebody to tell you a story? You're not gonna find better witnesses than these two."



## Chapter Three

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It seemed faintly inappropriate to hold the memorial ceremony for Marasiah Fel inside a sporting arena, but it was the largest gathering place in Galactic City, and the empress deserved as grand a crowd as could be mustered. A holo-image of her head and shoulders, blown up to the size of a small frigate, hovered over the great bowl, looking beautiful and stern. On the central floor, scarlet-armored Imperial Knights stood in perfect order and faced the raised dais on which a closed coffin had been placed. Also on the floor were dignitaries of every kind. Jedi Knights wore dowdy robes, while the Hapan delegation was dressed in the finest shimmersilks. Imperial admirals stood alongside ones in Alliance uniforms. Senators of all political affiliations were mixed together wearing expressions of grave respect.

As he watched the crowd from the ranks of Imperial Knights, Treis Sinde thought bitterly how a smaller but similar show of solidarity had been staged just weeks before, after the murder of Antares Draco. The very next day the political fighting had resumed, as vicious as ever. He doubted they'd respect Marasiah's memory any more than her husband's.

Still, everyone held solemn attention as Hogrum Chalk came to the center of the stage. His black robes, scarred face, and cybernetic eyepiece gave him a fearsome countenance, and supposedly pro-Alliance radicals were drawing quick comparisons to the legendary Darth Vader, but when he spoke his voice creaked with a very human grief.

"It is my sad duty to consign Empress Marasiah Fel, my niece, to rest this day," Chalk said. "Since childhood, Marasiah knew that rulership was neither an honor nor a privilege. It is a responsibility, and a grave one. To shoulder the weight of the galaxy is no easy task, but the Fel monarchs have given their lives wholly to the cause, again and again."

It was bitter truth; Treis had seen more than his share of monarchs put to rest. The cremation of Roan Fel was still fresh in his memory. Performed in the aftermath of the reconquest of Coruscant, while half the planet still smoldered from the fighting, it had been a private and solemn affair attended by select officials, Imperial Knights, and Jedi Masters. Hogram Chalk had spoken in praise of his brother-in-law's selflessness and honor, and only a handful had known those words were a lie.

The ceremony for Marasiah Fel was more like her grandfather's. Treis had been a mere teenager when he'd gathered with the other new Knights on the arena stage and watched along with gathered thousands as Emperor Davek Fel's body was put to pyre alongside that of his son Vitor. That was over forty years ago; right now it felt like even longer.

"Since Jagged Fel himself, their line has given everything in service to peace, security, and prosperity for all galactic citizens," Chalk continued. "Marasiah knew she might one day pay the final price, and she was prepared for it. The great tragedy today is twofold. One is that a woman so young should lose her life and leave no heirs to carry on her legacy. The second is that she already lost so much before her sacrifice. Just weeks ago her beloved husband Antares was killed. Three years ago, her father was felled by a Sith assassin and as a teenager a traitor slew her mother, my sister Elliah."

Chalk took a breath. "We can only pray that a *third* layer of tragedy will not be added to her death. To honor Marasiah, we must honor the system of law and order she gave her life to build. We must uphold the system she created and punish those who would seek to destroy it. Anything else would be a tragedy and a betrayal."

Treis wondered how political this would get. The Imperial and Alliance senators alike kept their expressions admirably stiff.

"You may ask yourselves: why? Why did Marasiah and her predecessors willingly give so much, when so little was given to them in return? It's because *someone* must. They understood that and were willing to take on the suffering for the sake of us all. It's with a heavy heart that I take on that responsibility now. As regent I will honor the galaxy the Fel family has died to create, no matter its cost to me.

"I do this out of love for my niece, for my sister long dead, and for all members of the Fel dynasty. Their light has finally gone out, and the galaxy is a much darker place for it. Tonight we will light one last blaze in their honor, and grant Marasiah the honor she deserves."

That was the signal. Hogrum stepped back from the stage's edge, and Treis joined five other senior Knights in stepping from the ranks and approaching the closed coffin. They surrounded its dais, took rehearsed positions, then solemnly ignited six pure-white lightsaber blades.

They'd rehearsed it, but Treis still felt something swell in his chest as he and the other Knights held out the blades. Hot white light touched six fuses at corners of the dais. Fuses burst to flame and six fire-hot lines raced from the edge of the platform and converged on the coffin itself. Solemnly, ceremoniously, the Knights shut down their lightsabers, turned their backs on the coffin, and walked back to the lines of their comrades. When Treis turned to face the coffin again, it was fully ablaze.

As he watched the flames climb toward the night sky and listened to a solemn version of the Federation anthem, all the past memorials rolled through his mind. It was as though this ceremony was the convergence of all the others he'd attended: Davek's and Vitor's, Elliah's, Roan's, Draco's. And now Marasiah's. He'd never felt so old.

And yet, those flames might not have been hers.

Investigators had rushed the empress' bombed apartment as soon as they could dowse the fire. The body inside had been burned beyond recognition but genetic testing had apparently confirmed it as Marasiah's. He'd spoken to the

empress just hours before and knew she'd planned to be in her quarters that evening.

He'd have never doubted her death except for the call he'd gotten shortly after the bombing. Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae had explained nothing; they'd only told him that Marasiah was alive, and Hogrum was a liar. He had no idea what had become of them since.

Treis was trapped in strange limbo, unable to grieve properly or trust anyone. If Hogrum Chalk- Marasiah's uncle, Roan's brother-in-law- couldn't be trusted, who could be?

And yet, Treis thought as he watched the flames, Hogrum *had* been a very convincing liar at Roan's funeral. More lies were possible, but he shirked from it. That kind of treason would be on par with Eshkar Niin, and Hogrum would never stoop to the level of the man who's murdered his sister. Treis refused to believe it.

And yet, something felt wrong about all of this.

The Force didn't tell him that, only his gut. After a lifetime of trusting the whispers of the universe's invisible flow, he was starting to question how often those whispers had truly been the Force, and how often he'd been hearing what he wanted to hear. Many of the younger Knights confessed that fear to him, and as their senior he'd given them his best hollow comforts. If only someone would comfort him.

There were no more speeches after the fire burned out. Alliance and Imperial dignitaries removed themselves peacefully from the main floor while the civilians crowded in the arena stands filed out by the thousands. The Imperial Knights were the last to leave, once the final smoke-whisps had left the empress' pyre.

It had been a long ceremony and Treis was an old man. He was tired and wanted nothing more than the peace of sleep, but as he removed his armored plates after returning to the palace complex there was a knock on his door.

Treis allowed one heavy sigh, then opened it. He was surprised to see a slim blue-skinned Twi'lek woman looking up at him. From her eyes he could tell she had been crying during the ceremony.

"Good evening, Master Sinde," Astraal Vao said. "I hope you're well."

She seemed stiff, on-guard, and slightly confused. So was Treis. “Good evening, Mistress Vao. Can I help you with something?”

“Regent Chalk has requested your presence.”

Astraal had been Marasiah’s friend and confidante, and she’d been a natural fit for the empress’ personal aide. It seemed much stranger for her to be running errands for Hogrum Chalk.

“All right. I’ll be in his office shortly.”

“Not his office, sir. His personal quarters.”

“I see.” Sinde blinked, then added, “I’m afraid I don’t know the way.”

“I can take you, sir.”

“All right. Give me a minute.”

Treis needed three to fully change into more comfortable clothes; he wasn’t as quick as he used to be. As he followed Astraal through the night-empty corridors of the palace he tried to recall if he’d ever been in Hogrum’s personal quarters in all the years he’d known him. He’d always been a private person, truly open to no one except his older sister. After Elliah’s murder a wall had seemed to fall between him and the other Imperial Knights.

Astraal let him enter Hogrum’s quarters alone. He’d expected something bleak and cold, in fitting with the man’s black robes and half-mechanical face, and was surprised to find it decorated in a slightly antique Hapan style. Elegant two-dimensional artwork hung on the walls next to tall cases full of datacards. Warm-tinted light fixtures were placed in corners and turned low to simulate hearth and fires. Hogrum himself, still in the metal casing he needed to survive, looked slightly incongruous in such a place.

“Thank you for coming, Master Sinde.” Hogrum took Treis’ hand and shook it once. “Sit down, please. I won’t keep you long, but there are things we should talk about.”

“Of course,” Treis said politely. He followed Hogrum into the living room and sat down in a low, soft chair facing the regent’s. Galactic City’s skyline lit up beyond the window; nestled against the frame was a waist-high table, its top bare except for a lightsaber kept horizontally in an elegant holder.

Hogrum noticed his gaze. “It was Elliah’s.”

“Ah,” said Treis. Nothing else came to mind.

The regent sighed. “I’ve been thinking lately about the day we first met. I’m sure you remember it.”

Of course he did. The Sith and their allies had been attacking the last redoubt of Hapan loyalists in the Orelon system. Their station, half-submerged in the swirls of a gas giant, had been doomed but Treis and Roan, with Nat Skywalker alongside, had charged into a flooding chamber to evacuate the nobles onto a starship flown by Roan’s uncle. Hogrum and Elliah had been two of the last ones aboard. The brother had been just a boy then, the sister a teenager the same age as Roan and Treis. He recalled the Chalk siblings’ utter ignorance of what had been going on outside their own corner of space, and Roan had been both affronted and intrigued by the girl who’d failed to recognize him as an Imperial prince. Even that early, Treis had known his friend was falling in love.

“That was a long time ago,” Treis said before he let memory swallow him. All of them were dead now except he and Hogrum, two old men.

“It was.” Hogrum looked away from the lightsaber. “Things were simpler then, in their way.”

Things always seemed simpler in retrospect, Treis thought. “What did you want to talk about?”

Hogrum settled into his chair. “Several things. I want you to know that I intend to keep using the Imperial Knights as best as they’re able, and not just as ceremonial props.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I’ll need your help, Master Sinde, and I need your assurances. The Imperial Knights swore to obey the reigning Fel monarch. The Fel line is dead, but I represent the same authority. I’ll need their loyalty as much as Sia or Roan did.”

“I understand. Though I should point out that the Imperial Knights were created to serve our monarch... as long as he or she acts on the light side of the Force.”

Treis didn’t add what they’d done to Roan Fel once he’d strayed to the dark. It didn’t need to be said aloud.

“I understand,” Hogrum said. “When Sia was alive, she could act as the Force commanded her. I cannot, and neither can anyone else except Cade Skywalker.”

Treis resisted a frown. He grudgingly admitted there were admirable traits in the rogue Skywalker, but he'd never be rulership material. "It's a difficult situation... but I don't want the Knights to be disbanded or turned to stage props."

"I agree. And that's while I'll need you to guide our Knights through what lies ahead. I have important roles planned. For a start, I'm going to spend the next several days meeting with the Hapans while they're on Coruscant. If we can work closer ties between the Federation and the Hapan Republic, it will solidify both our governments. I'd like you to select Knights to handle all security for those meetings."

"Of course."

Hogrum rattled off a list of further duties he needed Treis to assign Knights to. Most were located in Galactic City and involved providing security to important state functions. There was nothing wrong with that, but Treis felt dull disappointment. They'd done greater work once.

When Hogrum seemed done, he asked, "Sir, what about the investigation into Sia's death?"

"I have my intelligence people handling that."

"I know. You can understand, sir, that all of the Knights want a hand in bringing her killers to justice."

"I do understand, but I'll be blunt. I need our best investigators to make the case in public trial. Our Knights are fine warriors but they're not detectives. Sia sent two Knights halfway across the galaxy to find Draco's killers. They barely came back in one piece and totally failed to get hard evidence."

Treis knew which Knights he was talking about. "I see."

"That brings me to another point," Hogrum said. "I'd like you to personally make inquiries among your Knights. If any of them have even the slightest idea what's become of Krieg and Rae, I need to know."

"I assure you, we've had no contact from them," Treis lied instinctively.

"Their disappearance and the timing of it... is very distressing." His tone was dark.

Treis leaned forward. "I'm sorry, are you suggesting that they had anything to do with it?"

"It has to be considered. Azlyn Rae's loyalties have always wavering."

"I know, sir, but she'd never murder the Empress. And Master Krieg-"

"Krieg tried to kill himself out of guilt for spreading the virus," Hogrum said coolly. "Later on his best friend died in his arms."

"None of that gives him any reason to kill Sia. For Antares' sake, if nothing else, he'd-"

"There's no way to tell for sure what a man who's been through Krieg's mental trauma will do. I don't like this any more than you, but they have to be considered persons of interest in Sia's death. I've avoided making a public announcement about them, because I don't want to tarnish the Knights' image with unwarranted accusations... but something must be done to find them."

"There are... ways for Imperial Knights to reach out in emergencies." Encrypted frequencies which Hogrum surely knew and likely monitored. Treis had thought of those already.

"Don't attempt to make contact yet," Hogrum said, "Though if they *do* attempt to contact themselves, I want every word they say recorded."

"You don't trust them."

"We can't afford to trust anyone."

It was truer than even Hogrum knew. "So I'll ask around and wait to be contacted."

"That's right. If the time comes for more aggressive action, we'll decide on it together."

"Of course," Treis said, "Together."

The words were good enough and the private room, dark and soft with nostalgia, offered a glimpse into Hogrum Chalk he hadn't expected to see. Yet despite that, Treis Sinde felt discomfited as he returned to his room. It occurred to him that, for all his talk of utilizing the Imperial Knights, he was making them into little more than a glorified security team for the regent. In fairness, losing the Force had robbed them of many old abilities, but Treis believed his Knights were still capable of more.



The conversation about Ganner and Azlyn was more disturbing. He didn't fault Hogrum for being suspicious, even paranoid, but he couldn't believe the two young Knights could be complicit in acting against the empress.

But then, he couldn't believe it of Hogrum either.

He'd made inquiries into Ganner and Azlyn. What he reported to Hogrum would depend on what he'd find. As he reached his room Treis reflected wearily that in this new galaxy anything was possible. Now more than ever he craved certainty from the Force.

Sound sleep was a luxury of the young. As Treis Sinde laid down in darkness he resigned himself to a long night of questions, asked and unanswered.

Time had little meaning for Marasiah Fel. The gradual brightening and diminishing of overhead lights simulated day and night but she had no way of knowing how well they matched reality except for the natural rhythms of her body, themselves unreliable. Worse still, she had no Force to draw on for wisdom, guidance, or strength. Sometimes, when the lights turned off and she was dropped into full dark, she felt like she was already dead.

But she was only imprisoned. It was capacious as far as jail cells went: a completely circular chamber with a soft sofa and softer chair, a bed, a refresher alcove and two tables. A portal in the wall dispensed two meals a day and, every fake-morning, a new set of clothes: always the same loose white shirt and trousers. The walls themselves brightened in similitude of day. She'd explored every inch of room and could not find a corner in which the Force could be felt. Likely her uncle had placed two, maybe three ysalamiri around the room, completely enclosing it in a Force-blind bubble.

The worst part was that she didn't even know what the Force could do for her if she had it. She was somewhere deep in the underlevels of Coruscant, likely beneath the palace complex itself. Likely multiple layers of security- first automated, then manned- stood between her and any hint of freedom. Even if she did break out of this place, she had no idea where she could go.

The Force would avail her little, but then, the Force had disappointed of late. It hadn't warned her of her uncle's betrayal and it hadn't saved her husband's life. It hadn't provided wisdom or guidance when she needed it. At most it had propped her up with the strength to walk into her uncle's trap. During those death-times of total black, she felt glad the Force was gone.

Marasiah was starting to lose track of night-and-day cycles when her uncle finally came to see her. The walls were bright white when he entered through a door she'd only noticed on repeated inspection. The panel slid into the luminous wall and Hogrum was there, draped in black, like a singularity not even the room's brightness could touch. The door shut and locked behind him as he stepped inside, the hem of his cape trailing black on the clean white floor.

Marasiah stood in the middle of the room, hands clenched at her sides, wondering if she should attack him now. Wondering how much hurt she could deal before the room's unseen security shot her down.

"You should know that your memorial service was held today. It was quite a spectacle." Hogrum's voice was as unreadable as his scarred, half-metal face. "All the senior Alliance senators showed up to pay respect. Those still active, at any rate."

"What have you done?"

"What was necessary to preserve the Galactic Federation."

He sounded like he believed it, but she couldn't be sure of anything. She'd known this man all her life, trained under him, loved him and grieved with him when her mother had died. For the first time, he was a stranger to her.

"You were unwilling to take action against elements that would tear the Federation apart and plunge us into yet another war," Hogrum said. "However, your tragic death has given me the liberty to purge those elements."

She snorted. "You've arrested every Alliance senator?"

"No. Only Kaige and Nelloran. Admiral Stazi, naturally had to be apprehended." After a pause he added, "Senator Derrol escaped somehow, but he'll be detained in time."

"Stazi had nothing to do with Antares' death. And the others—"

"Stazi is an uncontrollable element. Darth Krayt failed to bring him down and it destroyed him. I didn't make that mistake." He paused again. "Unfortunately, a small group of Alliance ships, led by Admiral Bey, have gone rogue. They disappeared from Bakura and haven't been seen since."

Hands still clenched at her sides, she regarded him warily. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"You don't care what happens in the rest of the galaxy?"

"Of course I care. I've spent my *life* fighting every way I can for peace and order." Yet as she said it, the words felt hollow somehow.

Hogrum, though, took them at face value. "That's good. You're still your mother's daughter, Sia. From time to time, I'll stop by and discuss the state of affairs. Sometimes I may ask your advice."

"You can't be serious. You *deposed* me! You imprisoned me!" She took a step forward.

"What I did was for your good, *and* that of the galaxy." His black-draped shoulders shrugged. "I don't expect you to believe that now, but in time you'll be able to look at the situation objectively."

She threw out her hands at the chamber's bright walls. "What do you plan to do? Keep me locked up here, alone, forever?"

"As long as necessary, yes. Which may be.... quite some time."

"You can't believe I'll really give you advice. That I'll *help* you--"

"I believe you're your mother's child more than your father's. Which means you won't let personal spite overcome your desire for a peaceful galaxy."

His words hit worse than any insult. "If you think so highly of me, why did you depose me?"

"Your intentions are noble, Sia, but your judgment became fatally clouded by personal issues. Your husband's death. Your desire not to become your father. You were ignoring vital threats to the Federation and I did what I had to to preserve it."

"My judgement wasn't clouded. *Yours* was, when you took off Eshkar Niin's head."

He didn't flinch. "I took vengeance so you wouldn't have to."

"Don't lie me, uncle," she snarled, "You enjoyed it. Didn't you?"

"There was... undeniable satisfaction. Niin had already served his purpose. He gave us proof of Derrol and Stazi's complicity."

"He gave you a grainy recording. It means *nothing*."

"It's proof of what we knew all along."

"What you *wanted* to be true."

He flinched slightly. "You assume the best in people too often, Sia. It's a virtue in most beings, but in a ruler it's a vice."

"I'm not in the mood for your cynical wisdom." She crossed her arms. "You wanted power. You took it. Just admit it and don't try to act noble."

He exhaled, a tiny sign of frustration. "I don't take any joy in this. I saw the mistakes you were making and I did what I had to correct them."

"They were *not* mistakes."

"Yes, they were. I watched your father make mistakes too, year after year after year. I didn't even admit they *were* mistakes, not until Elliah died. Even then I followed his orders, because he was my emperor." Hogrum's lips formed a scowl. "If I'd acted sooner, things would never have gotten as dire as they did."

"Well, you've acted now. The weight of the galaxy is on *your* shoulders. Don't expect me to help lift it off."

"I don't expect it now. But give it time. It won't be today or tomorrow, but your anger will get cold. You'll know what I did was right."

"And if I do... if I admit how brilliant and righteous you've been... will you let me go?"

She got the answer she expected. Her uncle said, "Goodbye, Sia. We'll speak again."

Then he turned with a swirl of black cape. The same portal appeared in the door and Marasiah tried to peer through it, to get just a hint of the world outside her cage, but the room's bright lights obscured the outer dark. Hogrum vanished into the black, and then the portal vanished with a slide of white.

And then she was alone again, as alone as she'd ever been in her life.

Her knees went weak and she dropped into a crouch. This whole time she'd refrained from expressing her anger, sadness, or frustration. No tears, no shouts. She didn't want to give her unseen watchers the satisfaction, nor did she want her discipline to slip.

She couldn't hold it in any longer. Marasiah screamed once, as long as she could, as loud as she could, until her throat scraped, and when she was done everything was the same. She was still trapped in her cage, alone with silence and light.

## Chapter Four

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Eli Horn had anticipated a range of emotions he'd feel after finally finding Khat Lah and his mysterious hypergate: triumph, relief, awe, even fear. Boredom was the one thing he hadn't expected, but it was what he got.

The Yuuzhan Vong treated the Sith as just short of prisoners; even Skywalker's bunch were more accommodating. Eli and Talon were escorted by amphistaff-armed warriors wherever they went and were forbidden from climbing out of the canyon to access their ship. The warriors hadn't made a move to disarm them, and Eli had a feeling Talon might have risked fighting them, if not for the fact that they were blind to the Force and the Yuuzhan Vong were not. It was a stunning inversion of what used to be the order of things, and hardly the only one.

Unfortunately, nobody was willing to answer their questions. They were given food and a place to rest in a cliffside cavern, but their Yuuzhan Vong warders never let their guard down. Eli was pretty sure they were under guard even while sleeping.

The only amusement he got was watching the robed, blue-scaled saurians gather around Skywalker's two droids. C-3PO and R2-D2 entertained them for hours at a time. C-3PO apparently spoke their native language, because Eli couldn't pick up a word, but he could tell the droids were narrating a story from C-3PO's broad gestures and the occasional sound effects that escaped his vocoder. One alien even seemed to

be recording the words on a primitive parchment. What they were called, what they were doing here, how long they'd been here: Eli and Talon were free to wonder those things, but couldn't get any answers.

And then, after days of storytelling and pointless discussion with no one passing through the gate, someone finally took notice of them. When Khat Lah approached the guards stepped aside and respectfully backed out of earshot. The Yuuzhan Vong warrior, aged beyond Eli's understanding, looked at them both, and he knew in an instant that Khat Lah recognized him. Another unexpected emotion took Eli: shame.

Talon, however, stood tall in front of the Yuuzhan Vong. She let one hand dangle near the lightsaber at her hip, just to remind it was there. "We've travelled as long and far as Skywalker to find you," she said. "We deserved a chance to speak to you sooner."

Whether she was truly unbowed or just acting the part, Eli couldn't tell. Khat Lah, however, could.

"You should know that my warriors will not allow anyone to pass through the gate without the permission of the keepers of the Whills. If you try, they will kill you."

Talon didn't flinch. "What are these 'keepers'? I've never seen one of their kind."

"Historians from this galaxy call their race the Kwa. They have been guarding the hypergate for many millennia. They will not cease to protect it now."

"Skywalker said he could feel your warriors in the Force. Did the gate grant it to them?"

"They gained it on the other side of the gate."

"And what *is* on the other side?" Eli asked.

Khat Lah let his eyes rest on the young man for the first time. "A world you could never imagine, Eli Horn."

He flinched at his own name. Talon, still firm, asked, "How will they decide who goes through the gate?"

"It will not be *you*, Darth Talon," the Yuuzhan Vong said without taking eyes off the human. "Eli Horn, come with me."

"Why?"

"So we can speak in private. Come."

Eli placed a hand on his lightsaber. "Do you want me to disarm?"

"Do what you like," the Yuuzhan Vong said, and stepped away.

Eli looked to Talon, who responded with a stone-faced nod. Eli followed the Yuuzhan Vong past the guards, out of the cave and onto the pathway carved from the cliffside ledge. It slanted down toward other caverns and the canyon floor. From here they were on-level with the top of the hypergate arch, and looking down on the small figures below he could appreciate the scale of the ancient construct.

Eli tried to think about the hypergate, because it was easier than thinking of Khat Lah. After his father's death the warrior had been a constant presence for nearly a year. Eli still remembered how he and two other Yuuzhan Vong had bravely defended the Jedi younglings during the first assault on the Jedi Temple, and how he'd repeated the feat with K'Kruhk during the frantic final attack at the war's end. Later, during the years in hiding, he'd understood that the tall, powerful, sometimes scary alien warrior was also an adept like him, not comfortable with the strange powers he'd been gifted but determined to explore them to the fullest. Empathy with Khat Lah hadn't prevented the warrior from being intimidating. Right now, Eli felt more cowed than ever in his presence.

Khat Lah clasped hands at the small of his back and looked at the gate. "What do you think your father would see in you now, Eli Horn?"

He'd been afraid the conversation would go here. "You stole his name when you went running around the galaxy."

"It took it, as a show of respect. We'd both be dead without his sacrifice. I ask you again, what would he see in you?"

Eli had no idea. His father had died when he was five years old and he barely remembered the man. All he had left was lingering memory of a face and a Force presence, but he didn't even need that to know the answer.

"He wouldn't approve," Eli said curtly.

"Why did you join the Sith?"

"I was with a bunch of other apprentices, hiding out in a place that was supposed to be safe from Krayt's hunters. The



people there... our *friends*... were supposed to keep us safe.” He swallowed hard. His heart still burned at the memory. “They betrayed us instead. They sold us out. The people the Jedi did everything to protect turned on us just like they turned on my father. So when the Sith said ‘join us or die,’ what do you think I said?” His lip curled in a snarl.

“It is a hard galaxy,” Khat Lah said evenly. “Did you get what you wanted from the Sith?”

“I did. I was gaining power and strength like the Jedi never had. But that’s all gone now.”

“Yes. And if you had that power back, what would you do?”

“I’d never be a victim. Never again.”

“That’s not an answer. What would you *do*? Make yourself a dark lord?”

“I’ll never be as powerful as Talon or Nihl. I just want to be strong enough that I’ll never be at anyone’s mercy.”

“Not Talon’s? Not Nihl’s?”

Eli’s hands balled to fists. “What’s the point of asking me this?”

“I am trying to make a decision.”

“What kind of decision?”

Instead of replying, Khat Lah looked up at the sky. Cloud-drifts had dampened Rohakalla’s already-weak suns, trapping the canyon in a deep blue twilight. Quietly he said, “Many among my people believe no lesson is truly learned until it has been purchased with pain.”

The words sounded vaguely familiar; they certainly rang true for Eli’s life.

“I have never embraced the pain like some warriors,” he went on, “But there is wisdom in what they say. Do you agree?”

“I’ve learned a lot of things from pain,” Eli said gruffly.

“So have I. I believe the Force did not connect with me until it had found me at my lowest, when I was so broken I could be reconstructed into something more than what I was.”

“Sounds like me when the Sith found me,” Eli muttered.

Khat Lah shook his head. “No. We are talking about two different things.”

"If you say so."

"You don't understand. But perhaps you will."

Eli felt a spike of anger. "I didn't chase you across the galaxy for a year just to be told I can't understand anything."

"And how did you expect me to act when I saw you again? When I saw what you'd become?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I never... understood you."

Khat Lah let the comment pass. Looking at the gate again, he said, "You should have known I, not you, would be in the position of power. Arrogance is a Sith trait you've learned too well."

Eli hated being lectured, especially when it was true. "Is this what you took me aside to tell me?"

"I wanted to see what had become of the young human I knew... so many years ago."

"How many years has it been for you?"

"I've spent many on the other side of the gate." After a silence, Khat Lah asked, "How many have you killed as a Sith?"

Eli blinked in surprise. "I... don't know."

"Think. Tell me."

He took a breath, closed his eyes, thought. They're been deaths in battle; a lightsaber slashed through a blaster and then through a chest, kill or be killed. There'd been other deaths too, where the victim had been at his mercy. He remembered face but never names. Darth Talon had killed her beloved master on Krayt's order, but Eli's murders had always been anonymous, impersonal.

"How many?" Khat Lah repeated.

Eli took a breath, made sure he had the right number, and said, "Eleven. I've killed eleven."

"I see."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Did you feel powerful when you killed?"

Quietly, he said, "Yes."

"You do not sound proud of it."

He had been proud, back when the Force had flowed through him, enriching him with the dark side's power. When he'd made others into victims he'd felt a rush of certainty he'd never be one himself, not anymore. That black

and glorious feeling had disappeared with the Force. Now there was so much more uncertainty.

"If you received the Force again, would you still be Sith?"

"Of course."

"Truly?"

"I'll never be a Jedi. I'll never..." *Die like my father.* He couldn't say it. Just the thought twisted him with anger and sadness.

"There are more fates than Jedi and Sith. The Force is bigger than you can possibly imagine, Eli Horn."

"I'll have to take your word for that," he said bitterly. "Are we done here?"

Khat Lah looked at him; he looked away. With a hint of sadness, the Yuuzhan Vong said, "Yes. You may go inside."

Eli was glad to turn away. Two Yuuzhan Vong guards escorted him wordlessly back to the cave, where Darth Talon waited. She was, he thought with fresh spite, the closest to family he had left.

"The healers helped a lot," Jao said, "But I don't feel ready to smash sabers with a Sith any time soon."

Kyra could tell that just from looking at him. He'd put on a new pair of clothes since getting help from the one of the keepers of Whills- Kwa, Cade had called their species- but his face still looked pale, his eyes shrunken. She'd seen his bare abdomen and it looked as though that lightsaber had never touched him, but the rest of Jao hadn't adapted to the miracle recovery.

He walked a slow circle around *Mynock's* crew longue, flexing shoulders and twisting his spine, winced occasionally at real or phantom pain. To soothe him Kyra said, "From what I can tell, there's not much danger of the Sith making trouble. Those Yuuzhan Vong are keeping a close eye on them."

"Good. I think I'm ready to go down there and have a talk with those... keepers."

"You can try, but right now I think they're all engaged in storytime with the droids." She smirked, remembering the scene. When she'd found C-3PO's battered, dirty head in Rugo's Socorro scrapheap she'd never imagined she was

holding a living witness to almost two hundred years of galactic history. She felt honored just to have recovered him.

"I don't understand why they won't just let us through the gate," Jao sighed.

"Skywalker and Lowbacca say it's too dangerous. When I ask *how* it's dangerous they just shrug and say they're getting a lot of vague, kinda menacing talk." She shrugged. "I'm sure it would all go way over my head anyway. All of this... it's way past me."

When they'd first set down on Rohakalla, Kyra had felt a surge of joy that she and Jao had survived capture by that Sith apprentice, Eli. Once that faded, she was left wondering what the hell she was doing here. Cade, Jao, Lowbacca and the Sith were all looking to get their precious Force powers back. Jariah and Deliah had tagged along because of Cade, and she could tell they weren't very comfortable in this strange place.

As for Kyra, she wasn't sure of her role at all. She'd only learned of her Force-sensitivity days before losing it. Jao had taught her to touch its power briefly and it had been a joyous revelation just when her world was already opening wide. When it had disappeared, she'd felt a painful lack and decided to chase it as far as she could.

That had been a year ago, and she could no longer remember the feeling. Something had been taken from her; she'd grieved for it; now a part of her felt ready to forget it and move on with her life.

But on Rohakalla, that didn't seem to be an option.

"We could try and contact Ania," Jao said as he continued to walk around the cabin, stretching.

"Something about this system really mucks up communications, apparently. We'd probably have to take *Mynock* for a couple lightyears' jump."

"Then we'll ask Skywalker's permission. I doubt he'll say no."

"Do you want to call the other Imperial Knights and tell them what we've found?"

"I'm not technically an Imperial Knight myself," he reminded. "And right now I don't want to do anything to upset our hosts."

“So this place stays secret for now? Even from Ania?”

“We’ll see if we can get in contact with her first,” he said ambivalently. “And before *that*, we need to get permission from Skywalker to use his ship.”

“That sounds riskiest of all,” she smiled. “Do you want to try it?”

“Sure, I could use a walk.” He started for the exit with long, careful steps. Glancing over his shoulder he said, “Come on. I need you to show me what’s down in the canyon.”

There wasn’t much to show, Kyra thought, but she nodded agreement and followed. When this whole thing had started, Jao had been the teacher she’d needed, her guide to the strange powers inside her. She had a feeling that, no matter what happened here, she was going to need a guide again. For both their sakes, she and Jao would have to stick together.

Jariah Syn was not normally the type of man who ran around the galaxy seeking ancient and mysterious Force-powered artifacts. The only reason he was at Rohakalla at all was because his brother Cade thought they needed to be. Frankly, between the spectral blue-white sunlight, the alien mystics, and the looming forbidden hypergate, this place was really creeping him out.

He got distraction from an unusual source: the Yuuzhan Vong. His experience with those people was more than most in the civilized galaxy got but still pretty limited. Most only spoke scraps of Basic, the same way he only spoke scraps of Vong, but he was able to converse with a Basic-fluent one called Xahn Carr and get their stories. Unlike his old mentor Chonyo, these ones had spent most of their lives on Zonama Sekot. They had that rigid honor Yuuzhan Vong were supposed to have; many bore ritual tattoos on their faces and a few even intentional scarring. Most belonged to the warrior caste but he was surprised to find workers, extolled, even a priest and an apprentice shaper.

All of them had one thing in common. When Khat Lah had arrived on Zonama Sekot two years ago and announced that he needed help, they’d volunteered. None had visited the wider galaxy before and they didn’t seem to understand it all too well now. Their loyalty to Khat Lah seemed absolute, but

from what Jariah could tell it was it wasn't any kind of cult-like following of a slavish leader. They seemed to view the inexplicably-old warrior as a fellow student, more experienced than they but still making the same uncharted journey. They'd all joined Khat Lah for the same reason: they'd wanted to touch the Force, to know and feel it like he did. They'd gotten their wishes now, but from what Jariah could tell many were ambivalent about their new gifts.

He'd never had any hankering for magic powers himself, and judging from Cade's story they were more trouble than they were worth. Jariah knew what he needed to get through life: five senses, a good head, and a better blaster. Frankly, he thought the galaxy as a whole would be better off without the Force, not that he'd said it to Cade.

The Yuuzhan Vong were pretty forthcoming, probably since Jariah had an understanding of them most beings didn't. Yet there was one thing none of them talked about: what was on the other side of the gate. He gathered a few of them had died over there but they refused to say how. Each time they clammed up Jariah got the feeling that each Yuuzhan Vong was guarding a secret, less communal and more personal.

As they waited for the droids to finish storytime and the Kwa to decide who they'd let through the gate, Jariah explained all this to Cade and Deliah. The Zeltron was clearly as weirded-out by Rohakalla as Jariah and less interested in Vong stuff.

"Damn it, *meeshku*, I don't like this," she told Cade. "Let Lowie or Jao go through the gate. There's no reason you have to."

"I don't know if I'll get the option," he said.

"There's always an option." Deliah's blue brows pressed together. "Stang, what's going on, Cade? You do what *you* want to do, not what someone tells you."

"I know, Blue." He glanced down the canyon at the hypergate arch. "But I think whatever's over there... I want to see it. I've got to."

She put a pink hand on his arm. "You got us this far. I figure you've done enough for your mom's memory."

"It ain't just that. Just being here I feel like... I'm on this brink, and all I've got to do is take a few more steps before I

fall into something way bigger and more powerful than I can imagine.”

“Is that a good thing?” Jariah asked warily.

“I don’t know.”

“We’ve been to some weird places, Cade, but this is something else.” Deliah was blunt. “I don’t like it.”

“Biggest danger to us here are those Sith barves, and the Vong have them in hand.”

“On this side of the gate, yes,” said Jariah. “On the other side...”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re staying on *this* side. And don’t worry about me.” He gave them a cocky, so-Cade grin. “You all know I can handle myself just fine.”

Jariah knew when his brother was putting on a show; he also knew to let it go for now. The thing about Cade was that when he made a choice he barged ahead without hesitation, even if he wasn’t confident in the choice itself. The man did nothing in half-measures.

A whining sound filled the air and the three of them turned to see the repulsor-skiff they used for quick rides in and out of the canyon. This time it was lowering, and as it set down at the canyon floor they could make out to those onboard: Kyra and Jao Assam.

The Imp Knights had been cooped up on *Mynock*, healing from a lightsaber to the stomach. He’d never been down here before and as he approached them his head was lifted, eyes on the hypergate arch. The teenage girl had lower sights and a wary gaze on Jariah. She’d been like this ever since they’d reached Rohakalla. He knew well enough why; back when Eli Horn had kidnapped those two on Tython, Jariah had been forced to make some hard choices, one of which was popped a stun shot into Kyra while Eli was using her as a body-shield in the hopes of stunning the Sith kid too.

Things hadn’t worked but, and they’d both been taken captive, but Jariah had done the smart thing at the time and wasn’t sorry. The girl was unused to being shot and was holding it against him. Well, that was her problem; he wouldn’t apologize.

As the two of them got close, Cade called, “Glad to see you’re up and around, Cade *bukee*. How’s the side?”

"Healed, more or less." Jao placed a hand on abdomen. "I'm getting used to being... functional again."

"Take your time," said Deliah. "Those Whill-keepers are."

"Well, they've been here for thirty thousand years or whatever," Cade said with a shrug. "What's another day or two?"

"Well, we don't have to just wait," Kyra said, crossing arms. "Jao and I think we should take *Mynock* out of the system and try to make a call."

"I don't think calling a horde of Imps down on the gate is what we need right now," said Cade.

"I know that," said Jao, "But we should let *someone* know where we are. And we should check on what's happening in the rest of the galaxy. I remember things were starting to get hectic."

"Fine by me," Deliah said. "I could use a change of scenery."

"I second that," added Jariah.

"I figured you *pateesas* would say that," Cade snorted. "Who do you plan to talk to?"

"Ania, if possible," Jao said.

"We want to check on *her* too," Kyra added.

"Sounds reasonable," Cade allowed. "You should check with Lowie and see if he wants to join."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jariah saw more approaching figures. Everyone else followed his eyes and stiffened at what they saw. Jariah put one hand on his blaster as Darth Talon walked toward them. Her hands were free and her lightsaber was clipped to her hip. Two Yuuzhan Vong with amphistaffs followed her like a shadow.

"Well, how you doing, little *cheeka*?" asked Cade. "Enjoying the lovely sunshine?"

Talon looked briefly at the weird blue-white suns, then said, "I wish to leave this place."

Deliah snorted and said, "For once we're on the same page."

"We should not be idle while the keepers of the Whills deliberate," the Twi'lek said. "We should at least take a ship outside the system, where we can cast a clear signal and communicate with the wider galaxy."



Jariah shook his head. "If you think we're letting you run off and tell all your Sith buddies to come, you've gone *vermo*."

"I'm not expecting that. I would, however, like to know what's been happening in the galaxy while we've been incommunicado."

"You're not the only one," said Jao. "We were just talking about going up ourselves."

Talon was taken aback for a moment. "Let me come with you."

"You ain't in the position to be making demands," Cade said.

She blinked, stared at him, and finally said, "Please."

He snorted. "Stang, Sith learning manners? What next?"

"Tell you what," said Jariah, "We'll go up, come back down, and tell you everything we heard. We'll even let you listen to *Mynock*'s comm logs so you know we're not feeding you *poodooo*."

Talon frowned, and Deliah warned, "Not a bad offer, *schutta*. You should take it while it's on the table."

With a tiny sigh, the Sith relented. "Very well. I accept. Give me your comm logs once you return."

Cade wagged a finger. "Magic word, sweetheart."

"*Please*," she frowned.

"Yeah, that's the one." Cade tapped Jariah's arm. "Might as well start getting *Mynock* prepped."

"Sounds good to me," he said. Deliah was already starting toward the skiff.

As he trotted to follow, it occurred that kicking a Sith while she was down might not be the best long-term plan, but right now she and her boytoy were pretty much subdued, and would be indefinitely so long as they were cut off from the Force. It was a good place for the rest of them to be in, and as far as Jariah was concerned, cause for some well-needed optimism.

## Chapter Five

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The settlement on Concord Dawn's southernmost continent didn't look like much, but neither did anyplace else on the Mandalorian frontier world. Plowed fields stretched on for acres and the structures at the center were a simple wooden farmhouse, two barns, and an unpretentious gathering hall. The only unusual thing about it was the number of starships parked next to the structures, and even those were nothing fancy. It was, in short, not the kind of place you'd expect galaxy-changing events to happen, but happening they were.

Ania Solo had spent enough time among Mandos lately to know they'd get a kick out of that, but there wasn't any pleasure on Hondo Karr's face as he listened to Azlyn Rae and Ganner Krieg tell their story in full. The man's square face was locked in a tense frown and his wife, Tes Vevec, looked no happier.

After they finished the story, Azlyn passed a serious look around the group. "We realize this isn't much to go on," she admitted. "We know the empress is alive, but we have no idea where she's being held. It could be anyplace in the galaxy."

"Could be, but unlikely," said Ania's mother. Marin Skirata was gathered with the rest of them around the fire, and like Hondo she was hunched forward intently, elbows on knees. "Hogrum Chalk's entire rule rests on the idea that he's acting in the stead of his dead niece. He'll want to keep her close, on Coruscant. Probably in Galactic City itself."

“Well, that narrows it down,” Hondo said, voice rough with sarcasm.

Tes looked at the two Knights. “You said one of the stormies taking the empress away had an, ah...”

“Ysalamir,” Ganner supplied. “It’s a creature that suppresses your ability to use the Force. Don’t ask me how it works. I heard it’s something it evolved naturally to evade predators on its homeworld, Myrkr.”

“Ysalamiri are extremely hard to raise off-world,” Marin said. “They need native plants to survive and it’s almost impossible to get them to breed in captivity. Chalk doesn’t just have one or two of the creatures. He’d got to have an entire support system if he plans to keep the empress locked up indefinitely.”

That drew long looks from Ganner and Azlyn, probably wondering just how this strange old lady knew so much about obscure Force-blocking critters. Ania interjected, “Do we *know* he plans to keep her locked up? You know, indefinitely? I know he’s her uncle and all, but he *could* just kill her.”

Both Knights shook their heads with the fierce denial of people faced by things too awful to contemplate. Ganner said, “According to the news-nets, they found her body in the wreckage. We know she wasn’t in her room where the bomb went off, which means Chalk faked that part of the evidence. That means he needs Marasiah alive and must be keeping her somewhere. Almost certainly on Coruscant.”

“Coruscant’s a damn big planet,” said Hondo. “That’s not just trying to find a needle in a haystack. You’re looking for a needle that’s buried underground *beneath* the haystack. And the haystack’s as big as a whole planet.”

“The ysalamiri are a place to start,” Marin said patiently. “If we can track the flow of these creatures and their supplies into Galactic City, we can get a lead on the empress’ location.”

Tes said, “You’d still have to bust her out of wherever Chalk’s got her, which is probably the most secure room in the galaxy.”

“I thought Mandalorians liked a challenge?” Ganner sounded annoyed.

"I like jobs that pay well and don't get me killed," said Hondo. "Now, I respect your loyalty to your empress and all, but you've got to be reasonable. Even if you hired a couple boatfulls of Mandos somehow--"

"I have money," Ania said, though she'd never calculated how many Mandalorian boatfulls she could buy.

"-even if you did, it's still a couple teams of mercs running into the heart of an interstellar empire with no outside help. I'm sorry, *ner vode*, but some challenges are just too much."

Azlyn took a breath. "We may have some allies on Coruscant."

"You mean the other Imperial Knights?" asked Sauk. Ania's Mon Calamari crewmate had been quietly listening until now. The assassin droid AG-37 still stood tall and silent behind him, electric eyes blazing red in the night.

"It's tricky," Azlyn admitted. "We don't know who we can trust, or how closely Chalk is watching the Knights."

"You have to assume the worst," Hondo warned.

"We know," Ganner said heavily. "But if anyone can give us a lead us to where those ysalamiri supplies are going inside the palace... I'd bet it would be Master Sinde."

Ania asked, "I take it he's someone important?"

"He's our most senior Knight," said Azlyn. "He was a close friend to Roan Fel and he'd never betray the empress."

"Her own uncle did," Tes put in. "But let that go for a second. If you can trust this Sinde guy, fine, but you'll still need more help than that."

"We know." Azlyn looked at Hondo. "After we left Coruscant we tried to contact Anj Dahl and that Alliance fleet that went MIA. We didn't have any luck."

"I've been trying to snare Anj on our Rogue Squadron freq," Hondo said. "So far, no luck, but I'll keep trying."

"Do you really think the Alliance will help free the empress?" asked Sauk.

"Chalk is currently planning to put Admiral Stazi on trial for her murder," said Ganner. "If the empress suddenly shows up alive and well, you know exactly what it means for Stazi. *And* Chalk."

"They might not be willing to risk acting aggressively on Coruscant," Tes warned.

"If they weren't willing to take risks, why'd they jump out of Bakura?" Ania asked.

"No way to know any of that 'til we ask them," Hondo said with a sigh. "I'll keep trying to contact Anj. No promises."

"I understand," Azlyn said, then added, "Thank you very much."

Hondo nodded, a little sourly. Marin, after a spell of notable silence, said, "Sinde may be able to help us track the ysalamiri, but it would be good to know how they got to Coruscant in the first place. Myrkr's never been a high-traffic world. I'm not sure if anyone's recording comings and goings there..."

"But it's worth a look," Ania said. "And it's not far from Mando space either."

"A day each way, maybe," Tes said.

Ania looked at Sauk, then AG-37. "Well, guys, what do you say? Want to go for a little ride?"

"It would be no problem whatsoever," said the assassin droid's tinny voice.

"Great, we can set out tomorrow." She looked back at the Knights. "Do either of you want to come? I don't know exactly what to look for once we get there..."

"Neither do we," Ganner admitted, "But there are certain ship models Imperial agents tend to use. I'll come with you. Azlyn, you stay here in case you get in contact with Anj."

"Glad to have something like a plan," Hondo said and glanced at Marin. "You staying or going?"

Azlyn and Ganner gave her those questioning looks again. She ignored them and looked at the night sky. "I could stand another ride."

Ania felt a small flush of pleasure as the camp broke. Tes and Hondo retreated to their ship, the *Black Justice*. AG-37 and Sauk started toward *Free Agent*, while Ganner and Azlyn dipped into the darkness for some private words.

"That went a little better than I expected," Ania admitted as she stood up and stretched.

"What were you expecting?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought at least Hondo would come out and tell us this plan is totally *mir'osik* and we're *shabla di'kute* for even thinking about it."

Marin smirked. "You're starting to fit in."

"Not hardly. If I ever stick a bucket on my head and start singing war songs, I want you to shoot me." Ania crossed her arms but couldn't restrain a little smile. "Still... thanks for helping."

Marin looked down into the campfire. "Mandalorians say family is more than blood... but it's still blood. I never met Marasiah... but I have to do something for her."

In the silence of the night, Ania could hear the old ache in her mother's voice. There was still so much about the old woman she didn't know, like why she left the Jedi Order or what her relationship with her Fel cousins had been. There were layers of years and pain there, and even after what they'd been through it was forbidding to peel them away.

Quietly, Ania said, "This Master Sinde guy... you know him, right?"

Marin looked at her sideways. "Are you sure you don't have the Force?"

"I've got good instincts. Those are more reliable lately."

"I knew Treis Sinde, a long time ago..."

"And you think he's honorable?"

"I think he was. After all that time... Who knows how people change?"

Marin was certainly one to talk. Ania's mother had been a Jedi apprentice, a Jedi ranger, a part-time Mandalorian, and finally a civilian freighter pilot, wife, and mother before losing everything and throwing herself into a long quest against the ruling Mandalore, Yaga Auchs. That was over now and to Ania's eyes it seemed like a heavy weight had been lifted from Marin's shoulders.

That was good to see, but it was hard to know what could come after a quest like that. They were apparently going to find out together, which seemed cause for optimism. There weren't enough of those nowadays, and Ania was glad to have just one to call her own.

After their victory against Darth Krayt, the Imperial Knights had been flooded with applicants whose skills ranged from preternatural Force-talent to wishful thinking. Those had been heady days, and the newly-built training

center of the Knights, directly appended to the also-new executive palace complex, had seemed packed with life and energy. After Maladi's virus swept through its ranks, nearly all of those recruits had fallen back to their old homes in disappointment. The retention rate among anointed Knights was something to be proud of, but the tall, broad halls seemed bleakly empty now.

Maybe that was why Treis Sinde, who'd never been a man to lead from his desk, was spending more time in his office.

He had two Knights he knew he could rely on in front of him. To Yalta Val he said, "The regent has finally decided we can be of some use in tracking down Senator Derrol. You've spent a lot of time in the field, Master Val, so I want you to begin aggressively pursuing contacts aboard. Cast a wide net. By now Derrol could anywhere. Inner Rim, Outer Rim, anywhere."

The other man, twenty years younger than Sinde and with barely any gray in his beard, nodded. "Should I start asking my... less-than-legal clients?"

"That's exactly who Regent Chalk wants you to look into. He's given your permission to enlist ten other Knights of your choosing and whatever ships you need. If you think you have a lead, chase it across the stars if you have to."

"I'm glad we're finally being let off our leashes," said Sigel Dare. A good ten years younger than Val and under half Sinde's age, the woman had such a sculpted and stern face she could have passed for an empress herself. "Is the regent finally admitting his spynet isn't up the job?"

"He most certainly isn't," Sinde said. "He's intensifying the search for Derrol because he's decided to move up the timetable for the trial, and he very much wants the senator to be there along with Stazi, Kaige, and Nelloran."

"When does he plan to start?" asked Val.

"He hasn't announced it publicly yet, but he's looking at two weeks."

"Two weeks. That's moving very fast."

"He wants to get it done with."

"That's going to be a very messy trial," Dare said. "Especially with that Alliance fleet still unaccounted for. Security is going to be a nightmare."

"Indeed," Sinde said, almost thankful for the segue. "In fact, Regent Chalk had decided that you should be in charge of it."

The woman's face slacked with shock. "Me? Did he... ask for me personally?"

"He did. He knows your loyalty and professionalism very well, Master Dare. He also knows your desire to see Marasiah's killers brought to justice."

"*And Master Draco's.*" Her eyes narrowed. "For the crimes against us, someone has to be punished. Harshly."

"I agree," said Sinde, but stopped short of voicing his doubts. He'd told no one about the short, ambiguous comm he'd gotten from Azlyn and Ganner. He'd heard other Knights talking about their disappearance, variously wondering if they'd deserted, been murdered, or even been involved in the empress' murder, though they only said the last in whispers. Nobody had reported contact with them.

"Where does the regent plan to hold the trial?" asked Val.

"He wants to do this properly. They'll use a courtroom." Treis wagged a finger over his shoulder, gesturing in the direction of the judicial center. Along with the nearby Department of Transit and Financial Investigation Bureau buildings, it was one of a handful of government structures not wrecked during the retaking of Coruscant three years ago.

"That entire building will have to be put on lockdown," Dare said.

"I know. The regent says he looks forward to working with you closely to prepare."

Never one to back away from a challenge, the woman set her face back to stern and nodded. "I'll do whatever is necessary, sir."

"I'm sure you will. Thank you, Sigel."

"A question," said Yalta Val. "There aren't enough Knights to work security for the entire judicial complex. We'll be mostly using extant security staff, correct?"

"Of course."

"What about the Jedi? Have they been asked to take part?"

Treis turned from them to his window. Through the transparisteel plane he had a good north-facing view of the government district. Low buildings and extra-wide skylines



created a sense of imperious space, and the main executive buildings rose as pyramids or towers. He could see the drum-shaped judicial center two kilometers directly north, the transit and finance towers past it and to the west. Further still, some three kilometers away, was the low pyramid of the Jedi Temple. Treis went there occasionally on official business; lately it felt even more hollowed than the Imperial Knights' building.

Watching the Jedi Temple and the faint reflections of the Knights behind him, Treis said, "I understand an offer as been made to the Jedi to be part of the security team. Best I know, they haven't accepted."

"We don't need Jedi," Sigel said sourly. "They generally have Alliance sympathies. I understand the regent wants to look inclusive, but the Jedi will be more a liability than a help."

"I'm afraid I have to agree," Val said. "The Jedi are... honorable, but not always reliable."

"Ultimately, that's not your choice. The regent has made the offer. I imagine the Jedi Council is pondering it now."

"He's given them a dilemma," Val said thoughtfully. "Reject it, and they separate themselves further from the government. Accept it, and they accept complicity in whatever the outcome of the trial is. Even if they recuse themselves and try to stay neutral, it won't look that way."

Treis turned back around. "You have a good read on politics, Master Val."

Some Knights, and many Jedi, would have taken that as an insult, but Val just nodded. "I suppose he's just repeating how he's handled the senate."

"The senate is going along with the trial. How they'll react when they see the evidence... I don't know."

Dare asked, "Have you seen any of that evidence, Master Sinde?"

Treis shook his head. "The regent insists his investigators have it well in hand."

Or, he thought guiltily, the regent was busy manufacturing whatever fake evidence he needed to convict his political enemies.

“Whatever happens, the trial will be a turning point,” Dare said. “We’ll find out who our real allies are... and our enemies.”

Val nodded, and so did Treis, halfheartedly. The trial would be a climax of sorts, he was sure of that, but he increasingly doubted it would bring revelation. Until he spoke to Ganner and Azlyn again, Treis didn’t think he could be sure of anything.

## Chapter Six

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The lightspeed jump from Rohakalla lasted all of a standard minute before the light-show of hyperspace returned to black. They were on the very edge of the galactic disc, and a band of milky light stretched from one side of the cockpit viewport to another; aside from that, only a few faint stars twinkled in a vast black.

It was a strange and lonely sight, and it gave Kyra a chill as she sat in *Mynock*'s cockpit. Jariah and Deliah, manning the pilot and co-pilot's stations, just seemed relieved to be off Rohakalla. As the ship drifted in deep space, Deliah stared up the communications console and ran checks.

"Are we out of that interference zone?" asked Jao. He stood up and leaned over the back of her chair.

"Yeah, we look good to transmit," the Zeltron said. "Are we going to call your *municheeka*?"

"We're calling Ania. And she's not."

"Anything you say, Imp *bukee*." Deliah tapped the controls. "We've still got her hailing freq on the computer. Let's see if it works."

Kyra edged close to Jao and watched over her Deliah's shoulder. Over the past year their contact with Ania Solo had been sporadic at best as both *Mynock* and *Free Agent* darted ceaselessly around the galaxy. Kyra knew that, just as she owed Jao a lot, she owed Ania even more. If the older woman hadn't taken a shine to her back on Socorro she'd still be there, slaving away in Rav's petty kingdom.

They waited for some long, tense seconds before the console beeped and a blue holo-image resolved in front of them. Jao sighed with relief at the sight of Ania's pale round face.

"Ania, can you hear us?" he said, hunching close over Deliah. Kyra shouldered in, joining him inside the holo-transmitter's range of vision.

"I hear you, Jao," she said. "See you too, and Deliah and Kyra."

"We've got Jariah here too," the Zeltron added.

"It's been a long time," Jao said seriously. "You've missed a lot."

"I was going to tell you the same thing," said Ania. "Who gets to go first?"

"I will." Jao took a breath and pressed on.

He explained that they'd found Khat Lah along with an operable hypergate. It had been too long since they'd talked and Ania hadn't even known they'd been chasing a hypergate at all. Jao hurried through the explanation, barely mentioning their near-fatal involvement in a Nagai raid on Sebiris before getting back to the current dilemma. Kyra noted that he omitted everything about the Sith, and his near-fatal wound.

"We don't know if these guardians of the gate will let us through," he said. "It sounds like they might take *some* of us... but they're not cluing us in as to whom."

"But if you go through, you can get the Force back?"

"Apparently. The Yuuzhan Vong here can *all* touch the Force. That's what Skywalker says, anyway."

"And if it works for them, it should work for anybody." Ania's holographic gaze shifted slightly. "Deliah, have you ever wanted to read people's minds?"

"I'm an empath, darling," the Zeltron reminded. "I can read people, just not Jedi-tier."

"Then have you ever wanted to lift stuff with your mind and fight crazy battles against super-powered evil guys?"

"No," Deliah said, "But I end up doing the second part anyway."

"You and me both," Ania said dryly, then looked to Kyra. "What do you think? Would you go through the gate?"

If she didn't, Kyra thought dryly, the past year really had been a waste. "They talk about it like it's dangerous and they won't say how. But... I think I would, yes."

Ania nodded, acceptance. Jao asked, "What about you, Ania? You said you had things to tell us."

She sighed too, then explained it all. She talked about helping her mother's campaign against the Mandalore Yaga Auchs, which she'd been reticent to speak of before. She explained how the hunt had involved them in the Nagai and Ssi-ruuvi wars in the Outer Rim, and the dramatic twist where Ania's mother had sided *with* Yaga Auchs to take down the Sith driving those campaigns. She explained in detail the confrontation at Bakura, where Auchs himself had shot Darth Nihl, reigning Dark Lord of the Sith, dead.

"You're really sure?" Jao gasped.

"I was standing right next to Nihl when the laser bolt scrambled his brain," Ania said. "I'm sure. He's dead. And when Nihl went down, Auchs ordered all his Mandos to turn on their Nagai buddies. From what I heard, they specifically targeting any ship they knew had a Sith aboard and vaped it."

"Why did Auchs switch sides?" asked Kyra.

"Long story, but he wanted to get out from the Sith's thumb."

"So the Sith..." Jao hesitated, like he was afraid to even speak the possibility. "They're *gone*? For good, this time?"

"I don't know. We thought that after the Battle of Floating World and there were still some around. But their ships got vaped. Nihl's dead. One of the other big ones, ah—" She thought for a name. "Darth Havok, he's been captured on Coruscant. Probably dead too."

"How do you know that?" asked Deliah.

Ania sighed again. "That's another long story."

She plunged into that one next, explaining the frantic events on Coruscant that followed the Nihl's defeat. Kyra had been totally blind to all of it, and by the time Ania explained that she was en route to Myrkr, looking for clues to finding the supposedly-dead-but-really-imprisoned Empress Fel, Kyra's head felt like it was spinning.

When Ania was done Deliah grunted, "The galaxy just doesn't give you a rest, does it?"

“Apparently not,” Ania said, “But we can’t just let Marasiah rot in some jail while her uncle runs the show.”

Jariah, who’d been silent this whole time, said, “Y’know, I think I like relaxing on weird Force planets after all.”

Kyra looked to Jao. The indecision on his face was plain and she asked, “What do you want to do?”

“You don’t need to come running,” Ania said. “I think we have help already.”

“Mando help?” he asked.

“The best a stolen pirate’s money can buy. Besides, you’ve only got one ship, right?”

“Two,” said Deliah. “Bumped into some Sith on the way. Don’t worry, we’ve got ‘em under control.”

Ania’s expression darkened. “I hope so. They might be the last two Sith in the galaxy.”

“I can’t wait to give ‘em the news,” Jariah said with a mean grin.

“Listen,” said Deliah, “I’ll send you the coordinates for Rohakalla at the end of this message. Right now we haven’t told anybody what we’ve found. Not the Jedi, not to the Imp Knights.”

“With all that’s happening on Coruscant, it’s not safe to tell the Knights,” Jao said regretfully. “How are the Jedi handling all this?”

“They’re still there. Honestly, it’s like most people have forgotten they existed,” Ania said regretfully. “Without the Force... they don’t matter much.”

Jariah snorted. “Y’know, there was a time I’d have loved seeing the Jedi lose everything that made ‘em special. Hell, it’s still *kind* of fun...”

“But it didn’t go quite how you expected,” said Jao.

The other man nodded.

“Listen, you guys can do what you have to there,” said Ania. “We’ll keep trying to find the empress. If something big comes up for either one of us—”

“We’ll contact each other,” said Jao. “We’ve spent too long flying in separate directions.”

“Agreed.” Ania smiled softly. “We’re actually coming up on our destination pretty soon, so I should sign off and get prepped.”

“Understood. It’s good hearing from,” said Jao.

“Good to be heard. I’ll see you all around.”

Ania reached for her controls, and then her smiling face vanished. Silence took hold in *Mynock*’s cockpit as everyone processed what they’d heard. Kyra had been so busy here she’d forgotten the rest of the galaxy was still in flux. The situation sounded more dangerous than ever, and her thoughts went back to Sebiris, where the death and ruin wreaked by the Nagai had made her physically ill. That memory led back to Svivren a decade back, and the bombing that had wrecked the city and killed her parents.

The galaxy deserved peace after so much strife. Kids deserved to grow up with their families. Things were tipping toward chaos yet again and she felt a chill go through her. Lowbacca and Jao had both told her that the role of Knight-Jedi or Imperial- was to secure peace and justice in the galaxy. Scoundrels like Jariah groused that the galaxy was a better place without Forcer-users making trouble but he was wrong. Peace and justice didn’t come about on their own; they needed to be fought for, gained, and maintained.

The galaxy needed the Force back. It needed the power sealed on Rohakalla. As *Mynock* adjusted course and turned its nose toward a faint blue-white-double star, Kyra felt certain she was going exactly where she needed to be.

## Chapter Seven

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Aside from unique native fauna, there seemed little of note about Myrkr. When the freighter *Free Agent* exited hyperspace the planet lay dead ahead: a somewhat dowdy green-and-brown sphere, orbited by one small airless moon and no spacecraft that their sensors could pick up. According to the navigation catalogue Ganner had read en route, the forested world had been a smuggler hideout for centuries, then fallen into greater obscurity after its conquest by the Yuuzhan Vong. Perhaps because it had no cities or technology of note, the invaders had spared it the Vong-forming that had devastated Duro, Coruscant, and dozens of other planets.

As *Free Agent* drew closer, Ganner hovered in the back of the cockpit, watching the ship's crew run through sensor checks with a dull disappointment. He wasn't sure what kind of lead he'd expected to pick up here, but it looked like there was no lead at all. It filled him with frustration and anger; the kind that had been welling inside him ever since losing the Force, and which grew harder to contain with every mounting tragedy. Once he'd been considered one of the Imperial Knights's most calm and thoughtful members; without the Force as his constant guide he felt himself fraying, growing more desperate with every setback.

He needed to save Marasiah, but even more he needed the Force back. He wasn't sure if he could keep living without it and wasn't sure if he wanted to.



From the co-pilot's seat, Ania Solo released a sigh. "Well, this looks like a whole lotta nothing."

"I am forced to concur," said AG-37. "I detect no spacecraft in orbit. There are no thermal trails or particle traces detectable, which indicates no spaceflight in this region for at least the past seventy hours."

It felt profoundly weird to have a polite-speaking, independent-minded assassin droid sitting behind the helm of the ship. Apparently AG-37 was actually owner and operator of *Free Agent*, and Ganner was just starting to comprehend the importance of the name. The droid, he thought, must have an interesting story to tell.

"I'm not getting any signs of habitation on the surface either," said the Mon Calamari, Sauk.

"Drop into low orbit and try again," suggested the old woman, Marin Skirata. "I think those trees have mineral traces that mess up most ship's scanners. It's why this planet became a smuggler's nest in the first place."

"Don't get too close," Ania warned. "We don't wanna rouse up unfriendly locals either."

"I assure you, I will tread the careful line," said AG-37 as he pitched the ship into a controlled descent.

AG-37 levelled out in the upper atmosphere and Ganner held tight to a console to steady himself against the bumpy ride. Marin leaned over Ania's shoulder to carefully watch the sensor data coming up on the co-pilot's console.

Ganner had read the reports on Ania Solo and her gang and heard a little first-hand from Antares and Marasiah. He'd known about Ania herself, her droid and her Mon Cal mechanic. The old woman was new and he didn't know what to make of her. She was apparently a Mandalorian but she knew things you wouldn't expect from a typical bucket-head commando. As he watched her lean close to Ania he had to wonder if they were related. The ages looked about right for mother and daughter, but they didn't look that much alike; Ania had a rounded face while Marin's features were sharper, and the older woman was taller besides.

Ganner wasn't clear on how Ania was related to Marasiah exactly, but he recalled that Antares had once gone on a mission to Mandalore with Eshkar Niin and a single woman,

apparently a freighter pilot with Mandalorian family connections. Roan Fel had personally spoken to that woman to enlist her help, and Antares had been confused why his emperor would meet with a lowly civilian like that.

It didn't mean anything for sure, but Ganner held the fact in the back of his mind as he watched the Skirata woman.

*Free Agent* completed two full circuits around Myrkr, first to scan the northern hemisphere, then the lower. When they were done Sauk shook his head. "I still don't see anything. Those trees might be getting in the way still, and I'm not sure what else we could do."

Disappointment was palpable in the cockpit. Ania muttered, "Well, we all knew this was a long shot."

As the freighter peeled upward, out of the atmosphere and into a smooth vacuum flight, Marin glanced out the viewport at the distant pale-gray sphere of Myrkr's only moon. Her eyes narrowed and she said, "Give that thing a fly-by."

After a tiny pause, Ania asked, "You think we'll find something?"

"I think it's worth checking out," Marin said ambiguously.

"I will take us in for a closer look," AG-37 said as he worked the controls.

*Free Agent* accelerated smoothly. As the moon grew steadily larger in the center of the viewport, Sauk said, "That moon doesn't have any atmosphere to speak of. I'll scan for unusual metals and heat signatures."

Ganner, still on his feet, clung to the back of Sauk's chair as *Free Agent* pulled closer to the moon. They were close enough to make out the ridges and crater pockmarks on its surface, but not anything unusual.

As the ship drew closer still, AG-37 nudged it into the moon's orbit. Nobody spoke; everyone watched scanners and waited.

It was Sauk who finally said, "I think I've got something. It's definitely a heat signature, temps way above vacuum-cold."

"On the moon's surface?" asked Ganner.

"Right." The Mon Cal tapped his console. "Do you see it, A-gee?"

"Affirmative," said the droid. "I will take us closer."

AG-37 nudged the controls again and the freighter dropped closer to the moon's jagged surface. Like Ania and Marin, Ganner leaned forward to squint, looking for any discoloration or angular geometry that would indicate a settlement.

And then, without warning, the comm console buzzed. As Ania reached out to answer it, Sauk reported, "I'm getting more signatures! They look like ships!"

They did at that. Ganner could spot them with his naked eyes now: a half-dozen distant lights twirling up from the moon and vectoring toward them. Snubfighters, probably. They must have gotten too close to a nest of pirates or smugglers.

Ania tapped the comm console and was greeted by a harsh voice saying, "Repeat, surrender your vessel or be destroyed!"

"Is running away an option?" Ania asked. "Because I'd take that one."

"Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded, or we'll blast you back to atoms!"

She turned off the console and looked at the others. "I think we got a little too close to their hideout. They'd rather kill us than let us run and spill their secret."

Not a good introduction, Ganner thought as he watched the starfighters get close. As they began circling *Free Agent*, he made them out: old craft with long pointed noses, four thrust engines, and four jutting S-foils tipped by a lance-like laser cannon.

"X-wings," Marin said in disbelief. A strange smile creased her face. "Oh, that takes me back."

Incom X-wings have been common over a century ago. Ganner gave the woman a look; she was old, but not *that* old.

"We can handle museum pieces like those, can't we?" Ganner asked.

"That depends on the level of modifications given to these craft," said AG-37. "Shields are up. Weapons are hot. Ania, would you please man the concussion missile launchers?"

"Already on it," she said.

"I'll take the turret gun," Marin said and turned to her own console.

Ganner felt uncomfortably helpless as the X-wing continued to circle. As yet they hadn't fired, not even a warning shot, which suggested these pirates- or whoever they were- had a bark worse than their bite. Of course, if they were trying to scare *Free Agent* off, they could have just let them go.

Sauk checked his scanners again. "Something else is lifting off from the moon. A couple somethings. Looks like... D-wing assault fighters."

"Those are almost contemporary," Ania said under her breath.

"They're also heavily armed," added Marin. "A-gee, can this ship handle itself against military-grade heavy assault craft?"

"I would prefer not to find out," said the droid.

"Then we should cut and run before the D-wings get here," said Ganner.

They should, but AG-37 didn't touch the controls. Softly, Ania said, "This could be our opportunity, guys."

"To get blown up for no reason?" warbled Sauk.

The comm unit buzzed again. Ania slapped it with a sigh and a voice said, "This is your last chance! Surrender your craft now and prepare to be boarded or we'll destroy you where you are!"

"Listen, we'll willing to be reasonable. We didn't mean to trespass on your little hideaway and if we could just speak to somebody in charge-

"Never!" the voice snapped. "You've invaded the property of the great Volgma the Hutt and you will be punished!"

Ganner had never heard of that particular crime lord but it was hard to keep track of them lately. Ania and Marin, though, spun in their seats and stared at each other for a long moment. Then, incredibly, both women burst out laughing.

"Oh, sithspit, that's too good," Ania said. "What do you think, they just picked him at random?"

Marin shrugged. "Maybe. If they chose Vedo or some *real* gangster they might run into his real goons by accident. Not so Volgma."

"I guess it's not *too* stupid an idea. So how do you want to handle this?"

There was a flash of plasma and shield-scatter across their forward bow, and the cockpit rocked. Ganner bleated, "Does someone want to tell me what's so funny?"

Ania ignored his question and asked Marin, "Do you want to go right to the source on this?"

"I think it's worth a try. Hopefully he's not in a meeting right now."

As the X-wing circled ominously and the D-wings drew into view, Ania and Marin switched places. The older woman dropped in front of the comm console and typed in what looked like a long, complicated calling code. She waited some twenty seconds before a holo-image sprung up, containing the wide head and wider shoulders of a Hutt.

"Ah, what an unexpected call," the Hutt rumbled in passable Basic. "I presume there's a special occasion?"

"Actually more of an emergency. I'm dealing with some nasty pirate-types in the Myrkr system who claim to be working for you. My guess is they think throwing a Hutt's name around will increase their clout and scare intruders."

"Hoom! Outrageous!" Volgma thundered. "I have been a legitimate businessbeing for two standard centuries! I will not accept this shameless slander against my name! Let me speak to them immediately!"

Marin smiled tightly. "I had a feeling you'd say that. Give me a second."

She worked the console, shrinking the holo and connecting Volgma with the pirate-types on the moon for a three-way call. She said, "Can you hear me down there?"

"We heard you clearly," the harsh voice from before said. "Surrender at once or we will open fire!"

"Is the name of your boss, Volgma the Hutt?"

A tiny pause, then, "Yes, of course. Do you surrender?"

"How dare you!" a Hutt voice interrupted. "I am Volgma Anjiliac. I am a legitimate business-being and I will not allow you to appropriate my good name as cover for your criminal enterprises!"

The once-harsh voice was satisfyingly shocked. "We, ah, we--"

"I know what you are," Volgma went on, "Petty criminals claiming to be part of a syndicate! And you thought any Hutt

would do! That is slander against my person *and* my race! I demand an apology! I demand one *right now!*”

There was a long pause. Then the voice on the other end asked a question in Huttese. Ganner didn't understand the words but the tone was supplicatory. Volgma's response was in the same language, as vehement as before. The conversation went back-and-forth for another minute and the pirate sounded increasingly cowed. Those X-wings and D-wings were still circling *Free Agent*, but no more warning shots were fired.

Leaning forward, Ganner asked, “Who *is* this Hutt?”

“Old friend of the family,” Marin said with a cryptic smile. “We go way back.”

During the war, Ganner had had the exciting and exasperating experience of working with Cade Skywalker's crew. This one might give them a run for their money.

Soon the snubfighters peeled away and retreated toward the moon. Volgma, more subdued but still grumpy, said, “The criminals have been chastened and will not bother you again. I suspect they'll be vacating this little base shortly.”

“Good to know,” said Marin. “Thank you, Volgma.”

“Thank *you* for alerting me to their nefarious actions and letting me set them straight. Is there anything else you need?”

“Nothing comes to mind. I'll talk to you later, Volgma.”

The Hutt nodded as best as a Hutt could, and his holo winked out. With a satisfied breath, Marin pushed out of the co-pilot's chair and let Ania take her place.

“So that's it?” asked Ganner. “We can go?”

“Why would we go?” asked Ania. “This is exactly what we came here for. We wanted to know if anybody's been dipping in and out of Myrkr recently, and who'd know better than these guys?”

Eagerly, she tapped the comm console. A second later that same voice returned, sounding suitable chastened. “We've already reached an accord with Volgma Anjiliac. We have no quarrel with you. Please leave.”

“After what you tried to pull, I think you owe us- and Volgma- a little something in return. Don't worry, we've got something specific in mind and it won't give you much

trouble.” Ania leaned forward and smiled. “All we need is a little information...”

Anj Dahl nudged the stick of her Crossfire, pushing the starfighter into a long slow turn. She was back patrolling again, leading her wingmates on a lazy loop around the *Alliance* as it sat in the same spot of empty space. There were plenty of pilots in the fleet who could have flown the patrol but she’d volunteered to go out again, just a day after her last flight. She’d never been good at sitting around and she needed to at least delude herself she was doing something worthwhile.

The hum of the Crossfire’s cockpit was a comfort, but after the first thirty minutes boredom began to nag at her, and with boredom came anxiety. She started to imagine all the ways this isolated stand could end, and none of them were good.

Reverie was interrupted by a buzz from her comm console. Anj frowned; it was an incoming transmission but didn’t seem to be from the fleet.

Before she could check it, Rogue Three asked, “Is anyone else getting that signal?”

“I am too. It looks encrypted,” said Rogue Four. The newest pilot in the unit, she’d been unlucky enough to join right before the campaign against the Ssi-ruuk.

Anj tapped her console and looked at the readout. She recognized the alphanumeric string immediately and said, “All pilots, sit tight and do not respond. I’ll answer the call from here.”

It was the frequency the Rogues had used to communicate in secret during the war with Krayt. Precious few pilots from that conflict were still with the squad, and none of them on Anj’s wing now. As she entered her decryption key she wondered which ex-Rogue could be calling. Monia Gahan was the option that sprung to mind first.

When the comm system accepted her key, Anj said, “This is Rogue Leader responding.”

“Rogue Five, reporting in.”

She recognized the voice instantly. “Stang, Hondo. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Thought our business was done, did you?”

She had. Thanks to Hondo and his rogue commandos, Admiral Stazi had been able to forge a pact with Mandalore Yaga Auchs, which in turn had allowed them to dismember the Sith/Ssi-ruuvi/Nagai coalition that had been mucking up the Outer Rim. That glow of victory had lasted mere hours, and she'd barely thought about the whole thing since *Alliance* went into hiding.

"You know my situation, don't you Hondo?"

"I do. Not the specifics, only the general."

"This can't be a social call."

"It's not. I had some very interesting strays wind up in my lap."

"What kind of interesting?"

"The kind that says they really need to talk to your people." This comm line was supposed to be super-secure, but Anj heard hesitation in his voice.

"About *what*? Give me something more specific."

"They've got a story about what happened to the empress that diverges pretty far from the official tale. And I'm pretty sure they're telling the truth."

"Are you saying you trust them?"

"Yeah, I do," he said after a pause. "I'm not saying to give 'em the coordinates to wherever you are... But you might want to send somebody to talk to them."

"And where are you now?"

"Concord Dawn. I can pipe you specific coordinates when you show up."

"When *I* show up?"

"Who else would the admiral trust with a top-secret, high-importance mission?"

"No need to flatter, Hondo. I'll take your request to the admiral."

"Then we'll be on the lookout. Hail me again with this freq when you reach the Concord system."

With an unceremonious click, the transmission closed. Anj sank into her seat and exhaled. Hondo was acting damn confident that she'd do exactly as he requested, but then, he *was* Hondo. His brazen bets had a tendency to pay off. She still didn't understand the half of what was going on, but her interest was certain piqued.



And, she thought, a mission to Concord Dawn would be a hell of a lot more interesting than staying here, waiting for nothing to happen.

Anj flipped her comm system back to local frequency. "Something came up," she explained. "I'm heading back to base. Rogue Two, take point and complete the patrol as scheduled."

"Understood, Rogue Leader."

Anj jerked the control stick, angled the nose of her fighter toward *Alliance*, and kicked the engines. Inertia pinned her to the back of her chair and she felt a small rush of adrenaline. Hondo was right, of course. Whatever this new mission entailed, she'd see it through to the end.

Upon their arrival at Aphran IV, Saaraï concluded that her husband's judgment was correct. This was, indeed, a good world to be overlooked on. The urban centers were small and scattered across vast continents covered by mountains and forests. The homestead occupied by Samine Doklus was located some five kilometers outside one of those towns, and to get there Saaraï and Porat had to walk an uphill forest trail. It was the kind of place someone settled if they wanted to get away from the galaxy's greater drama.

Samine herself was a Togruta. She looked middle-aged and her skin was shades of blue and forest-green, more subdued than usual for her species. They'd given her no advance warning of their arrival, but when they knocked on the primitive wooden swing-door to her home, Samine opened it and looked at them without surprise.

"It's been a long time," Porat said. "I'm sorry to intrude on you here, but the situation's gotten rather desperate. If you let us in, we can explain."

Samine looked from him to Saaraï, then back to him. "I know this place looks simple," she said, "But we *do* get the HoloNet."

"Of course," Porat gave a polite politician's smile. "May we come in?"

Samine nodded and stepped back, leaving the door hinged open. Saaraï entered first, Porat behind her. The house's insides matched the outsides: wooden walls and floorboards,

simple decorations and tools. Saaraï asked, "Did you and your husband build this yourselves?"

"We had some help," Samine said. "Local contractors, mostly."

She eyed the young Chagrian carefully, uncertain what to make of the woman who'd followed Porat in flight. To her and the rest of the galaxy, Saaraï was just a civilian refugee in well over her head. Only Porat knew what she'd already endured, and what she was capable of.

"You like privacy, that's good," Porat said as he surveyed the room. "Don't worry. We're not going to ask you to shelter us."

Samine relaxed slightly. "You want me to contact Tantor, don't you?"

Porat nodded. "He told me once that he shared one of our secret comm freqs with you."

"He insisted we be able to contact eachother in any emergency." She gave a small smile.

Saaraï asked, "Have you spoken to him since Bey's fleet went missing?"

"No. I haven't risked it."

"I strongly doubt anyone is monitoring communications from *here*," Porat took in the cabin with the wave of a hand.

"True." Samine crossed her arms. "If you want me to be honest, I haven't tried to contact Tantor because I'm afraid I might not be able to."

"If Chalk had found Bey's fleet, we'd know by now. They'd be trumpeting victory over the news-nets."

"Maybe," said Saaraï. "That wouldn't go over well with Brighton and the senators, though."

"I really doubt Chalk cares what the senate thinks," Porat growled. "The man's determined to stamp out every trace of democracy in this galaxy and replace it with old-style Imperial authority."

Saaraï held in a reply. Sometimes Porat's Alliance ardor blinded him to the nuances of politics. It seemed clear to her that Hogrum Chalk was playing a careful game, keeping his enemies close and eliciting their cooperation, if not their loyalty. He was trying to solidify his rule while also sustaining the power structure he'd inherited from his neice.

It was, she thought bitterly, much the same thing her father had done after Krayt's apparent death. Darth Wyyrlok had been unable to sustain his power play and died because of it. Whether Chalk would do better remained to be seen. He, at least, had the advantage of replacing someone who would stay dead.

Porat turned his impassioned stare to Samine. "Please, help us contact your husband. We'd like to join Admiral Bey's fleet, if we can."

"I'm not sure that's really the safest place for you to be," the Togruta said.

"I don't want to be safe. I want to help free admiral Stazi and restore democracy to the galaxy. Getting in touch with Bey's fleet is the first step to doing that."

Saarai restrained a smile. As if he'd respond any other way.

Samine tilted her head thoughtfully. "Tantor was right about you. He always said you walked the line between foolish and brave."

"All of us did back then. Tantor too. If we hadn't the galaxy would still be under Krayt's heel."

"I know. When the war ended I tried to talk him into retiring. He said he would, and helped build our house here, but he didn't give up his commission. Just a little longer, he kept telling me. And now look what happened." She closed her eyes, exhaled. "Give me a few minutes. I'll prepare the comm system and see if I can reach Tantor."

"Thank you. I'd repay you if I could."

"Consider it an act of patriotism." She opened her eyes and looked at Saarah. "If you want to stay here with me... I think I can shelter you."

She shook her head. "I'm staying with Porat."

"I thought you'd say that," Samine said, without judgement. She turned and left the room through a side door, leaving Porat and Saarah temporarily alone.

Quietly he said, "They probably won't give us direct coordinates to the fleet. They'll send a shuttle out to fetch us. We should be ready to ditch our ship in deep space somewhere."

"I know," she whispered.

They waited for a minute, listening to the sound of

movement in the other room. A low humming sounded through the walls as a power generator fired up. This truly was a simple life Samine had made for herself. Maybe Tantor had planned to join her here, maybe not. It was the kind of existence Porat had never wanted and neither had Saaraï, not in either of her lives. The powerful rage and cruelty of the Sith seemed like a dream to her now, vanished along with the Force, but her father had taught her other traits that stuck. Precision, self-discipline, pragmatism. Most all he'd taught her ambition. Saaraï could never retire to a cabin in the woods and let history pass her by.

Porat was the same. Though they'd started in the most different places, something had brought them to the same place in the end. Perhaps it had been the Force itself, imparting fresh destiny as one last gift to Saaraï.

It was possible, but she hoped it wasn't true. The Force empowered you but it overwhelmed you too, twisting your senses and perceptions. She saw more clearly without it and was glad to have it gone.

The door opening again and Samine poked her head into the room, breaking Saaraï's reverie. The Togruta said, "Come in. I have Tantor on the line and he can't wait to speak to you."

## Chapter Eight

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When *Mynock* returned from its away mission, Jariah Syn came to Darth Talon with a single data-playback rod. He said nothing as he handed it to her but his smile was tight-lipped, his eyes dark with satisfaction. She knew there was nothing good on the recording and but a Sith did not give in to fear. Talon listened to it right away.

She sat in the cave and played with while Eli, unawares, restlessly walked the canyon floor below. Most of the voices were easy to decipher: Syn himself, Deliah Blue, Imperial Knight Jao Assam. One female voice clearly belonged to the young woman Kyra, whose history and purpose Talon was still uncertain of. The fifth voice chimed faintly with her memory of Ania Solo, cousin of Marasiah Fel and killer of Darth Wredd.

It was that voice that delivered the hammer-blow. Lord Nihl, dead. Lord Havok, dead or imprisoned. It sounded like the others had been routed, many or most killed. She didn't even know who would assume the title of Dark Lord with Nihl and Havok gone. Neither of them had had the vision of Darth Krayt, but they'd still had ambition, ferocity, and determination. Perhaps there *was* no leader. Perhaps the Sith were scattered.

Perhaps they were *all* dead, all of them except for her.

The thought stabbed icy terror in her chest. She'd been taught to harness here fear, use it, and turn it into strength, but that was so hard without the Force. Even with it, she wasn't sure she could tame the fear. She got up and paced

anxiously in the cave, staring into dark shadows to avoid the questioning eyes of her Yuuzhan Vong watchers.

All of her life she had served. She'd given herself wholly to Lord Krayt's vision, trusted that vision, killed her own master and surrendered her life countless times. Krayt had been killed, his vision too, but still she'd moved on, serving the Sith even as he trust in Darth Nihl quietly eroded, serving because serving was all she'd ever know.

Even when the Force had been stolen from her, she'd devoted herself to serving the dark side as remembered in her heart. Without a higher cause, she would truly be nothing.

Eventually Talon walked onto the canyon ledge and looked out. Rohakalla's twin suns cast everything in a spectral blue-white glow, and she wondered if perhaps she was dead and this some strange afterlife. She would rather die than live without the Force to give her strength and the Sith to give her purpose. Her lightsaber was still at her belt, the one thing that hadn't been stolen from her. She could take it in hand now, plunge it into her breast, and end it.

Talon had never thought about killing herself before. The very idea had been repulsive, a selfish waste. But now, as her palm brushed its hard smooth surface, the weapon felt like a comfort. It was the one thing that would not fail her.

A shudder ran through her and she pulled her hand back. She could not give in to those bleak thoughts. She *would* not. Frantic and fearful, she groped for escape. The recording may have been a cruel trick, something fixed up by Syn and even Ania Solo to torture her, but it had been a long recording, and everything in their voices had sounded authentic. There might be some other Sith still alive. There had to be; Sith were canny, Sith were survivors, Sith were not wiped out by treacherous vermin.

It had been true once, but without the Force, maybe the Sith were mere vermin after all.

She had to find out for sure. Her lightsaber was more than just promise of oblivion; it was her chance to escape. She could fight her way to the ship; Eli would be helpful with that, at least with running interference. She could escape, jump clear of the system, and make a wide broadcast on the frequency the One Sith used to communicate in emergencies.

Some of them would be alive. Some of them would hear her. They would rush to her side and together the last scraps of the Sith would return to Rohakalla, break through the gate, and seize the power locked away there. And then, rejuvenated and in touch with the dark side, they could destroy the gate to seal that power away, then compel the whole galaxy to submit.

It was an intoxicating dream, too good to believe, but Talon had to try. Even if she died, she would die with purpose; far better than empty despair.

She took a breath of cool air to clear her head. Yes, she had a purpose still. She was Sith for a little while longer. She waited atop the ledge until Eli approached her, coming up the slanting path from the canyon floor.

He stopped a short distance away, eyeing her carefully. "What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Talon held out her hand and showed him the recording rod. "Come inside," she said. "There's something you need to hear."

Shortly after *Mynock* returned from its away mission, C-3PO and R2-D2 completed their tale-telling. The keepers of the Whills retreated into their caves and everyone else was processing the latest news from elsewhere. The only ones who seemed unaffected were the Yuuzhan Vong guards, who continued stoic vigil around their holy gate as though the latest galactic crisis didn't matter to them. And, Kyra supposed, it didn't.

The news had left her restless, though. It felt like the stage was set for something to finally happen on Rohakalla but the Kwa seemed as unresolved as ever. She realized the Kwa had been around for a while and weren't in any hurry, but the rest of them were, and it was getting on everyone's nerves. Even Lowbacca was looking agitated.

As they settled into another night, eerie for its starless sky, Kyra ventured close to the gate. The Yuuzhan Vong at its base watched her but didn't move to interfere; with their eyes or the Force, they could tell she was harmless. It was a great arch of rugged stone, maybe twenty meters high at the peak. It could have been mistaken for a freak natural formation;

she only spotted a few portions where the stone had been broken away to reveal the ancient machinery beneath. She had no idea where it drew power from or how to trigger it. She couldn't even guess what it looked like when the great artifact turned on. She only knew she felt very small beside it.

"We have not spoken yet."

The sudden voice made Kyra jump. Her heart was pounding when she looked to her side and saw Khat Lah looking down on her, leathery Yuuzhan Vong face unreadable.

She hadn't spoken to other Vong in canyon, or any Vong at all, not in all her life. She waited for her heart to slow down before she replied, "I didn't think we have anything to talk about."

"And why did you think that?"

It sounded like a such a stupid question. Kyra was a nobody; her parents were dead and she'd spent most of the past five years living in a junkyard. The only reason she was here now was an unlikely combination of now-sterile midichlorians and the kindness of strangers.

She hugged herself awkwardly as she found a response. "Well, I get why you'd talk to Skywalker. And Jao and Lowbacca, since they're Knights. Even the Sith. But me... I'm kind of along for the ride."

"Skywalker said the Force moves through you."

"It *moved*, past tense, and only a little. I... never even knew I had it until right before it was taken away."

"Were you given training?"

"No. Nothing formal. Just a lesson or two from Jao." She smiled sadly. "We were going to practice more, but something messed with our plans."

"And what did you want to achieve? Did you want to become a Jedi? An Imperial Knight?"

"Honestly... I didn't think about that in detail. I just wanted to be... *more* than what I was." There seemed no reason not to tell the truth, or at least a some of it. "My life was opening up then after I'd been trapped for a long time. And I got this glimpse of something that was so much more than I'd ever imagined, only to get it slapped away. It didn't seem fair. I thought I had to fix it."



Honesty came easily. She wondered if Khat Lah was using the Force on her, or if she'd just needed to get those words out. Despite his size and alien features, Khat Lah didn't seem dangerous to her. There seemed to be a weary calm about him, like he'd seen so much already that nothing could rile him.

"What were you before you learned to use the Force?"

She exhaled. "It's kind of a long story, and not really interesting."

"Tell me. Please."

Kyra told him. She mentioned her childhood on Svivren, what little she remembered. Her throat welled a little as she described the attack that had levelled part of the capital city, collapsed their apartment block, and killed her parents. She listed off the planets and ports she'd drifted through, just one more child left orphaned by the war, uncared for and unnoticed except by beings who wanted to use her. She described the streets gangs she'd run with on a handful of Outer Rim backwaters before finally stowing away on a ship and ending up on Socorro, fixing broken vehicles for a kindly Herglic until a bounty-hunter had shot Rugo dead and left her to run the junk shop, and to shoulder the debt to Rav.

Finally she told him about Ania and Jao and Cade, about how they'd whisked her away to freedom and given her all those things she'd dreamed of having but never thought she could.

When she was done, Khat Lah gave a thoughtful hum. "Are you a believer in destiny?"

Kyra blinked. "I... don't think so. My life never looked like it was going in any special direction. I just tried to survive. The way I see it, I ended up here because of chance. Or if I'm being optimistic, the kindness of strangers."

"Or," he said, "the will of the Force."

"Does the Force have a will?" she asked, slight tremor to her voice. "I've heard Jao and even Skywalker talk about it, but I wasn't never sure if meant it literally. I don't think they know either. But you..."

When she trailed off, he asked, "What?"

"You know things, right? Things you haven't even told Skywalker yet?"

"I do. And even I have much to learn."

"Okay," she said. "I guess we've got one thing in common, then."

"Indeed." His thin lips peeled back to show a pointy-toothed smile. "And would you like the touch the Force again, even if it brings you danger?"

She swallowed. "Yes. I wouldn't have come all this way if I hadn't."

"And if you had the Force again, what would you *do*?"

And answer leaped to mind. "There's a lot of things wrong in the galaxy right now. It sounds like they're tipping to another war. That shouldn't happen. Jao tells me the point of having the Force is bringing peace and justice to people who don't have it."

"And is that the role you want?"

"Someone has to do it. The Force... is a gift. I won't pretend to know all you can do with it, but if you've got it, you shouldn't waste it."

"You sound very certain."

"I've lived through a lot of bad stuff. Other people shouldn't have to."

"And it would be your duty to save them from it?"

His voice was skeptical, but she nodded. "If I have special power, that's how I'd use it."

"Very well." Khat Lah took a breath and looked up at the arch. "After consulting with the keepers of the Whills, I have made a decision. We will open the hypergate tomorrow, and you will pass through it."

"Me?" Kyra stared.

"Yes, you. And Cade Skywalker." His voice went hard. "And Eli Horn. Together, you three will join me on the other side of the gate."

## Chapter Nine

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Given the motely mix of starships parked at the settlement on Concord Down- which already included a CEC light hauler, a MandalMotors attack ship, and slant-winged Koensayr scout- one old Corellian disc-shaped freighter fit in pretty well. The ship, called *Scarlet Star*, was their visitor from Admiral Bey's fugitive fleet, and to Ania's surprise, its pilot had come alone.

When Hondo Karr raised the point, Anj Dahl smiled and shrugged. "I asked for a co-pilot but the admiral turned me down. Turns out I'm expendable."

"I highly doubt that," Hondo grinned and pulled her in for a short hug. Ania knew Hondo had been a Rogue Squadron pilot while on the run from Yaga Auch's. He seemed to have made comrades-in-arms even on side jobs.

Ania had met Anj briefly, back on the empress' flagship during their excursion to Gree space last year. That felt forever ago but Anj remembered Ania and she certainly remembered AG-37. The only one she didn't seem to know was Marin, and if she had any suspicion the older woman was Ania's mother and a Skywalker, she didn't let it show. That was good, because Ania was pretty sure Ganner was piecing it together. The truth would probably out sooner or later, and she'd have to talk with her mother about getting the inevitable over with.

Right now, though, everyone gathered in the settlement's convocation hall. They sat along a stretched-out table like

kids at a cafeteria, but their conversation was grave. Ganner and Azlyn told their whole story, and Anj took it in with periodic nods and no comments.

After that Ania explained what they'd gotten from their run to Myrkr. After sufficiently cowing the smuggler nest they'd disturbed, the criminals had handed over their data tracking ships coming and going from Myrkr over the past month, which was as far back as their records went. In all that time the lonely planet had been visited by only a handful of ships not connected to the smugglers themselves. An old CEC Action VI transport had set down on the forest world and lifted off a standard day later. A refitted SoroSuub yacht had flown one orbit and left without touching ground and a big Damorian bulk hauler had skirted the edge of the gravity well before promptly jumping elsewhere.

And then there was the Incom IC-2 scout ship that had made to visits to the planet, spending six hours on the ground each time. The visits had been spaced ten standard days apart and the more recent one had taken place at roughly the same time as Marasiah Fel's supposed assassination.

"IC-2s are common civilian ships, but Imperial intelligence likes to use them too," Ganner said. "They're quick and inconspicuous."

"They're not big, either," said Anj. "How many of those ysal-whatsits do you think they could fit on one?"

Ganner shrugged awkwardly. "The creatures themselves are less than a meter nose-to-tail. It's the plants they need to live that are difficult to raise off-world."

"Well, if they're going to be holding Marasiah Fel indefinitely, they'll need to keep making trips. I imagine they're pretty well-supplied, but they might still come back." Anj looked to Ania. "Do you think your new friends can give us a tip-off if they come back?"

"I understand they'll be vacating the moon," Ania said, "But nothing stops us from dropping a sensor buoy in orbit. It can alert us the next time the IC-2 or anything else stops by."

"That's a good plan. You should get on that right away." She glanced at the Imperial Knights. "Any chance you can find help on Coruscant?"

"We think we can trust Treis Sinde, leader of the Imperial Knights," Azlyn explained. "But lines of communication to him are probably monitored. We'll need to try and reach him in-person."

"You mean go to Coruscant?" Anj looked between the two. "No offense, but if you want to go incognito, you'll need to do more than just ditch the armor."

"I realize I'm not the best for the job," Azlyn said, with a small frown on her scarred face. "Ganner and I have talked this over. He'll be the one to insert on Coruscant."

"I was going to say he's the preferable option. But again, you'll need to do more than ditch the armor."

Ganner frowned. "I'm not that recognizable... am I?"

Anj's eyes darted up and down. "Two meters tall, pasty white skin, long red ponytail. That's three marks against you."

Azlyn smiled softly. "She's got you there."

"All right. I'll do something about the hair." He touched his red locks like he feared to lose them.

"Good. You probably shouldn't go alone." Anj looked to Hondo and Tes. "I've seen these two in a firefight. They're pretty good."

"We're better than good," Hondo said, but didn't volunteer his services.

Ania figured this was where she came in. "I know you don't want to take on the entire Federation, Hondo. We don't either. I've still got some credits left. How about I pay you and whoever you want to bring along to guard Ganner's body?"

Hondo and Tes exchanged reluctant looks. AG-37 said, "Whatever Ania offers to pay you, I will match it." Everyone looked at him. His red photoreceptors pulsed thoughtfully and he added, "Maintenance on *Free Agent* is relatively inexpensive, so I have most of my bounty left over."

Anj looked between her and the droid. "How did you two get loaded?"

"Long story," Ania waved a hand. "The point is: Hondo, will you take our contract?"

"With the droid throwing in, how can I refuse?" The Mando threw up his hands in surrender. "All right. We can

guard your body, Imp *vod*. Don't do anything stupid so we have to rescue you."

"I'll try not to," Ganner said seriously.

Anj thought a moment, hesitated, then said, "There's someone else on Coruscant who I think can help us. Monia Gahan."

"The senator?" asked Sauk.

"And another old Rogue," Hondo said. "You tried contacting her on our freq?"

Anj shook her head. "Too risky. We can be sure Chalk's monitoring every transmission she gets. She'll be a hard one to talk to... but if possible, I think she should know about all this."

"What kind of help do you think she could get us?" asked Azlyn.

"I don't know. But if anyone on Coruscant could help—besides Sinde—it would be her."

Sauk raised one flipper, like a student to be called on. "I have an idea."

"Go ahead," Ania said.

"Last time we were on Coruscant I met up with some Mon Cal refugee relief organizations. I gave them donations and talked to their leadership. I know for a fact some of them have Senator Gahan's ear."

Anj nodded eagerly. "Sounds like the perfect messenger, so long as they can talk to Monia someplace that's not bugged."

"We've got jammers that can block surveillance devices," Hondo said. "No problem there."

"Not a bad plan," Ania said. "Who knew being philanthropic could help you down the line?"

"Virtue is supposed to be its own reward," said Sauk.

"Is it? Well, I like this kind of reward better." She looked to Anj. "So here's the big part. When we go to bust Marasiah out from wherever they have her, what can we expect from the Alliance?"

After an increasingly enthusiastic conversation, the pilot's expression fell. "I'm not sure if there's anything we can offer you."

“What do you mean?” Azlyn asked. “If we free Marasiah we discredit their entire case against Stazi. We discredit *Chalk*. This is a win for everyone.”

“I already made that argument to Admiral Bey. He’s... skeptical.”

“Of what?” Ganner said, suddenly angry.

“If we expose Chalk’s lie there’s no telling how he’ll react. He might lock down and declare martial law. He might just shoot Stazi and the senators.”

“So you do nothing? That’s not fair. Marasiah is the rightful leader of us all.”

“So is Gar Stazi. They’re both legal heads of the Galactic Federation- or they were, until last week.”

“They still are,” Ganner insisted.

Azlyn, a little calmer, said, “The empress always tried to deal with your people fairly. She deserves your support.”

“I’m giving you support just by being here, but you can’t expect us to commit to anything, especially now, when don’t have any facts. We don’t even know Fel is alive, not for sure.”

“Why else would they be harvesting ysalamiri?” asked Marin. “The galaxy isn’t flush with Force-users nowadays.”

The irony of that thankfully went over Anj’s head. “I don’t know why. None of us knows anything, which is my point. Maybe if you people can come up with a really good plan, where the Alliance stands to benefit as much as you...”

She trailed off. Ganner shook his head and his face twisted in a scowl. “Alliance versus Empire, still, after all we’ve been through? What happened to the Federation?”

“It was a nice idea,” Anj said softly. “Those tend to run hard against reality.”

“It could still work, if we get the empress and Stazi both freed,” Azlyn said. “I’m willing to plead our case to Admiral Bey himself, if you’ll let me.”

Anj sighed, but nodded. “I expected you would be. That’s why I came in something roomier than a Crossfire.”

“I’d like to go too,” Ania said.

The other woman regarded her. How much she knew about Ania and Marasiah’s relationship- sporadic and tense as it had been- she didn’t say, but she nodded. “*Scarlet Star*’s got

room for plenty of passengers. We're only using my ship, you understand? Operational security."

"We understand perfectly," said AG-37. "Ania, if you don't mind, I'd like recuse myself from your side in this instance. Instead I think another duty calls-"

"No offense, but you're not coming to Coruscant," interrupted Hondo. "If you're travelling incognito, don't bring a three-meter-tall assassin droid."

"That was not my intention. I was going to take *Free Agent* and deposit a sentinel buoy over Myrkr."

"Good thinking, A-gee," said Sauk.

"Then it looks like everyone's got a part," Anj said. "I'll let you boys and girls get stuff finalized. Take your time. I'm going back to my ship to ping the fleet."

That was almost true. Ania's mother had been mostly silent during the conversation, and she didn't clarify anything in the talk that followed; that was mostly Hondo and Tes brainstorming over which Mando buddies to take on the team to Coruscant. After they stepped out to make some calls, Sauk and AG-37 retreated to *Free Agent* and the Imperial Knights went back to their ship. It was down to mother and daughter again.

"Well?" Ania asked. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Watching the distance, Marin said, "I think I should go to Coruscant."

Ania had been readying herself for that. "Going to see your old friend, Treis?"

"He wasn't my friend. And I might not even meet him. The thing is, Ganner and Hondo and Tes might find out where Marasiah is and scout it every way you can think of... but they'll never see things the way I do."

"Does that matter, with those ysalamiri things?"

"I don't know. I've never actually dealt with them before, but I've heard they create this... vacuum in the Force. A bubble of emptiness. If I can sense beings disappearing and re-appearing as they go in and out of the bubble..."

"I get it. It makes sense." Ania paused. "I guess this is where I say 'may the Force be with you.'"

"It is. It always has been, I think, even when I didn't want it."



Her mother looked thoughtfully into the tabletop. Ania ventured, "It sounds like more trouble than it's worth, overall."

"I thought that for a while. But not anymore."

"Well. You heard what Jao said. They've found Khat Lah and some ancient Force gateway thing. Maybe everyone else will get it back too."

"I noticed you didn't tell Anj about that."

"Well, what's to tell? I figure that's Force-user business. Doesn't have to do anything with the mess we're in."

"If the Force hadn't gone silent we'd never be in this mess at all."

"It'd be nice if it got us out of it."

"Yes. It would." Marin tilted her head back like she was examining the ceiling, or maybe something higher. Ania knew when there was nothing left to say, and she quietly excused herself.

There wasn't room in their ship to do what had to be done, so they borrowed the refresher in the main house instead. The mirror by the sink was cracked in one corner and dirty on the edges, but Ganner was nonetheless able to watch as he chopped off his own ponytail, then handed the shears to Azlyn. She cut his hair even closer to the scalp, shedding long red locks across his shoulders, before finally taking a borrowed automatic razor and shaving him bare to the scalp.

Ganner watched it all happen in the mirror, but when she was done the man staring back at him still looked like a stranger.

"You don't like it," Azlyn said as she brushed his shoulders clean.

"It's... strange."

"If you can't recognize yourself I doubt Chalk's spotters will." She ran a hand lightly across the gleaming white of his head. "It's not bad. Just... different."

Her smile was soft, maybe even playful. It roused in him some of his old fondness for Azlyn, his old desire. Events had twined the two of them close together lately, but it had become hard to think of her as he once had. Romantic longing required a seed of hope, and everything in the past

year- losing the Force, then Antares, then Marasiah- had combined to steal his hope away. He found himself embarking on this mission not because he believed it would succeed, but because he had no place else to go.

Azlyn was different. It was strange that she, who'd been so long torn between Jedi and Imperial Knights, had adapted to losing the Force better than him. Maybe it was because that dilemma had been removed that she found herself free to act on her own conscience. For Ganner, it seemed like everything that had given his life purpose had been successively taken from him.

"Hey," Azlyn said, brushing a strand from his cheek, "It's not so bad. And you can always grow it long again... in a year or too."

Still staring at his own eyes, Ganner gave a brittle smile. "It should be a good disguise."

"Do you know how you'll contact Master Sinde?"

"I have ideas."

"Well, I'm not sure how I'll get through to Admiral Bey, but I'll have to come up with something."

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Azlyn."

"Really?"

"Really." He smiled again, a little stronger. He had more faith in her than himself.

She placed both hands on his shoulders. "Just keep your head on straight. Don't take any risks. And don't jump out of an airspeeder when it's a couple hundred feet in the air."

She said it with a joking smile, but he'd done just that on their trip to Vorzyd V. He'd let his grief and frustration boil to the surface; it had ruined his judgment, ruined the mission, and nearly gotten him killed. His shattered leg still wasn't completely healed.

"I'll exercise discretion this time," he said.

"That's all I ask."

Azlyn lifted her hands away but the feeling of warmth remained. He tried to cling to that feeling; he'd need its memory in the days ahead.

The Alliance renegades were sparing no precaution. After leaving the Aphran system, Saara and Porat flew to a set of

coordinates located in open space at the edge of the Tapani sector. After waiting at the rendezvous point for a tense standard hour, a single *Nune*-class shuttle dropped out of hyperspace and transmitted half of a passcode. Only after Porat transmitted the other half did the shuttle move close enough to couple airlocks with theirs.

As requested, they'd emptied the ship of all their belongings and wiped its computers. A pair of Alliance soldiers escorted them through the airlock and to the shuttle cockpit. They watched stars pan and shift, and saw the ship that had carried them off Coruscant sitting alone in the black. They watched the Alliance shuttle fire off a short chain of laserblasts that tore through the unshielded hull, ignited the fuel core, and turned their ship into a fireball that cooled slowly to debris. The adage about burning your bridges had never felt so literal.

Even then, the Alliance troops were careful. By Saara's count the shuttle took five separate lightspeed jumps over the course of eleven hours, which meant their final destination could have been in a dozen different sectors. She and Porat waited patiently in the shuttle's passenger cabin the entire time. The Alliance troops who guarded them seemed excited to have them aboard but had apparently been ordered to say little.

They were allowed back inside the cockpit after the last hyperspace jump. The shuttle had already plunged into the midst of a sprawling fleet. Saara looked closely and counted seven Mon Calamari cruisers, with probably a few more out of visual range. *Alliance* was a fitting centerpiece to the formation: a proud white wedge emblazoned with Alliance crests on either flank.

She remembered Lord Krayt's wrath after this ship—originally named *Imperious*—had been stolen. The Dark Lord had slaughtered dozens of Mon Calamari on a public broadcast, including former Alliance triumvir Gial Gahan. After that he'd initiated the purges that had culminated in the genocide of Dac. Saara remembered that her father had been upset by Krayt's actions; not their brutality, but their recklessness. He later told her that was the first time he'd considered usurping the Dark Lord's throne.

If the Alliance had never stolen this ship, her father might not have betrayed Krayt. The One Sith might still rule the galaxy. Darth Maladi might not have gone mad and severed them all from the Force. Saaraï herself might now be training to be the fourth Darth Wyyrlok, loyal serval of the immortal Krayt.

She banished those thoughts. If you started asking ‘what if’ there was no end to it.

The Alliance shuttle dipped below *Alliance’s* broad superstructure and flew into a ventral hangar bay near its nose. She saw an honor guard arrayed to greet them: lines of blue-clad Alliance soldiers, though no officers were visible. After they landed Porat and Saaraï were escorted down the ramp and onto the deck, where a single Cerean soldier was waiting with a small portable device in hand.

Porat seemed to know exactly what was happening. He took a step forward and held his hands at his sides. The Cerean, whose cone-topped head reached nearly as high as Porat’s horns, held the device in front of the Chagrian’s eye. A retinal scanner, Saaraï thought. Apparently *Alliance’s* ship-board computers still had registry information for old crew in its databanks.

Once the Cerean took his scan he stepped back and checked his device. Finally, this face relaxed to a small and he snapped a brisk salute. “Welcome aboard, Senator. It’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to be back,” Porat said, looking around the hangar. “My wife, Saaraï.”

“It’s good to have you as well, Madam. I’m sorry for the security procedures, but we wanted to be absolutely sure.”

“There’s nothing wrong with caution. We’re up against a canny enemy,” said Porat. “May I speak with Admiral Bey?”

“He’s waiting for you, Senator. Right this way.”

A handful of soldiers fell in around Porat and Saaraï as the Cerean escorted them down the halls and onto a railcar that whisked them toward the after of the three-kilometer-long destroyer, then up a lift to the command level. Admiral Bey was waiting for them in a conference room. The broad-shouldered Weequay had a friendly smile on his leathery face, and he shook Porat’s and Saaraï’s hands in turn.

"I'm so glad you're here," Bey said. "You'll have to tell me how you managed to escape arrest."

"Pure luck," Porat replied. They were never going to tell anyone the full story. "I only wish the others could have been so fortunate. I heard they arrested Stazi on the ground at Bakura before anyone knew what was going on."

Bey's face turned to a scowl. "They did. I had a choice then. They already had him in their clutches and I could either submit to their authority, I could try and fight, even though they already had him... or I could run."

"You made the right choice. We couldn't just give in." Porat clasped his arm and gave it a squeeze. "Have you decided what your next step is?"

"Unfortunately, no. I'm still hoping to avoid another war."

"We all are. But we can't let the Imperials destroy our democracy without firing a shot."

"I don't want that either. You see my dilemma."

"It's *our* dilemma now. We can hope for a miracle that lets us win this fight peacefully... but we need to be prepared for what happens if the miracle doesn't show."

"I know." Bey's eyes slipped to Saarai; it was that same evaluating look she always got.

"Anything you have to say to me you can say to my wife," Porat said firmly. "I've told Stazi the same thing."

"Yes, he did mention that." Bey nodded acquiescence and gestured to the table. "Have a seat, both of you, and I'll explain. Something's come up. The details aren't all clear yet, but I'm hoping they'll give us just the miracle we need."

## Chapter Ten

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The opening of the gate felt like it should have been accompanied with more fanfare. Instead the hours before were strangely mundane. Yuuzhan Vong removed pieces of its stone frame to access and check the ancient machinery inside. Several Kwa supervised them, reading from scraps of parchment that must have been ancient instruction manuals, probably copied and re-copied over generations as the parchment itself crumbled to dust. This place was so old it beggared the mortal concept of time; it seemed impossible it should exist at all.

The technical details of the thing bothered Cade less than the rest. As he watched the Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa run checks, he stood beside Khat Lah with arms crossed and a heavy backpack resting against planted feet. He hadn't been told much of what he'd find on the other side, but Khat Lah had suggested he bring rations, tools, a medical kit, and his lightsaber. Cade had packed everything from *Mynock's* emergency kit until his bag weighed twenty kilos. He hoped it would be enough.

He heard a noise behind him and glanced over his shoulder. Kyra, with a heavy pack of her own, crossed the canyon floor and followed R2-D2 as the astromech rolled up a slanting pathway and climbed toward one of the caves nestled in the stone wall.

When she was out of sight he turned back to the gate and asked Khat Lah, "Are you *sure* you made the right choice in travelling companions?"

"I have already explained my reasoning."

"Well explain it again."

"That you should come is obvious. The Force has stayed with you when it has abandoned the others. As the descendant of the Chosen One, you may be able to see things on the other side the rest of us cannot. You may even be able to speak directly with the Whills."

He thought back to his experience inside the Tho Yor and frowned. "I'm not exactly looking forward to the conversation."

"It must be ventured. If anyone can speak to them, it would be one who carries the essence of the Chosen One."

"Yeah, I get that," he sighed. "I noticed a couple Kwa made a big deal about me being a Skywalker. Struck me as kind weird, seeing as there *were* no Skywalkers the last time anybody paid them a visit."

"The prophecy of the Chosen One is far older than Anakin Skywalker."

"Yeah, I know. But anyway forget about me, I'm more worried about the other ones. I still don't see why we're not taking Lowbacca and Jao."

"The Whills exist in a state beyond what our individual minds can conceive. The closer we get to them, the more line between self and others will blur. I'm concerned about powerful individuals having an... overwhelming effect. Lowbacca especially."

"But you're taking *me*."

"You are a Skywalker."

"Did I ever mention how sick I am of people telling me that?"

Khat Lah glanced at him sidelong. "I do not think that you are. I knew your grandmother. She did not embrace her name either, but again and again she used her powers and did what had to be done."

"I ain't my grandma. She was nicer than me."

"Perhaps. But you have come this far."

Cade sighed. "I thought we were done talking about me. Tell me about *Kyra*. She's a good enough kid but she barely knows anything about the Force. I don't even know much raw power she has."

“That is something we can learn. I have talked to her. She has endured much, but she had a righteous heart.”

“They got a saying about roads paved by good intentions.”

“Indeed. But without them, we’d travel nowhere at all. We can see how she reacts when her powers are reawakened. We can direct them and direct her on the right path.”

“Well, that sounds charitable.” He moved hands to his hips. “Now tell me about Eli. He’s the one I’m *really* worried about.”

“He has also been wounded, more deeply than Kyra. The Sith found him broken and rearranged him in their image but they haven’t remade him. If anything he stands on the brink of breaking again.”

“I noticed he and Talon haven’t reacted well to news of the Sith being wiped out.” Cade couldn’t help a grin. “Still, the kid’s got all sorts of bad in him. I got sympathy for his pain, believe me, but I really don’t think this is the time and place to try turning a Sith apprentice good again.”

That was putting it mildly.

Khat Lah said, “You think I am letting guilt dictate my actions.”

“I know you watched over the kid after his dad died, but he made his own choices. The Force ain’t a cure-all. The only one who can fix Eli is Eli.”

“I agree, but his best chance of conversion lies through the gate. I will do everything I can to guide him and so will you.”

“I will, will I?”

“With your powers-”

“Yeah, but no. I get I have the magic genes or aura of the Chosen One but I’m not him. I can’t work miracles and I can’t just tell the whole *grancha* Force to do my bidding.”

“That,” Khat Lah said, “is a matter of debate.”

Cade turned full toward him. The Yuuzhan Vong looked as serious as ever.

“Oh, come on,” he sighed.

“There is something you should see before we depart.” Khat Lah bent low, plucked Cade’s pack, and swung it over one shoulder. “Come.”

Cade didn’t budge. “Where are we going?”



“Not far. Come,” he repeated. “We can collect Kyra on the way.”

Kyra hadn't spent much time in the caves and tunnels carved into the canyon wall- she'd preferred *Mynock's* more familiar insides- as she followed R2-D2 through the torchlit passages she started to realize there was the equivalent of small village here. There would have to be, she supposed, if the keepers of the Whills had been hiding here for millennia. She still didn't know how many of the Kwa there were on Rohakalla. Less than two dozen appeared on the surface at any time but there seemed enough underground space for far more. She didn't know their lifespans, or how big the population had to be to safely reproduce and promulgate itself down the centuries. Maybe there were other Kwa hiding out on other planets, and maybe other hypergates too.

She knew when they'd reached their destination by R2's triumphant tweet and the gleam of C-3PO in the astromech's headlight. The protocol droid shifted at the sound and turned to face them.

“Ah, Mistress Kyra! I was so hoping to see you before you departed!”

“You're going to miss, me, are you, Sleepie?”

Just saying the droid's old nickname made her smile. When she'd found the battered head-and-torso in Rugo's junk shop, its cogitation matrix had been so damaged it could only speak in slow, somnolent syllables. He'd been just one piece of trash among many but he'd been the closest thing she had to a friend after Rugo's murder.

Kyra had never imagined that her broken droid could be tied to something so great. Maybe she did have some kind of destiny after all.

Her pack was getting heavy and she swung it off her shoulders to the ground. Only as she stretched her back did she looked around the cavern and realize how large it was. The main floor was the size of a springball court and the walls rose up in four tiers. The stone walls had been carved into shelves, and on the shelves were hundreds of volumes of bound parchment.

"I take it, Mistress Kyra, that this is your first time being here?" C-3PO said, shuffling to one side so she could get a look at the wooden table behind him. Loose sheets were spread across it, and half-hunched over them was a robed Kwa. The alien lifted its head and released a series of unintelligible hissing sounds.

"Mistress Kyra," said C-3PO, "Please meet E'Cavas, the Keepers' designated archivist. He says he is quite pleased to meet you. E'Cavas was happy to record my tale and is currently adding to their Journal of the Whills."

R2-D2 blurted rudely. C-3PO gave a good imitation of a human sigh and said, "Yes, yes, Artoo, we told our story together."

R2 chirped again.

"Well, yes, I admit you had somewhat more material to add than I, but it wasn't *my* fault I've suffered a memory wipe and a near-fatal accident. Not all droids are blessed with your remarkable good fortune." C-3PO heaved another mock-sigh and looked to Kyra. "The Keepers were quite interested in our story, actually, since it's been so long since they received visitors. In addition to translating, I also had to make some changes to temper Artoo's embellishments."

"What kind of embellishments?"

"I should say, his self-aggrandizing tendencies. If you listen to him you'd think he destroyed the Death Star himself." C-3PO's head swung back and forth. "His ego can be very frightful sometimes. Thankfully, I was able to set the record straight."

R2-D2 stayed diplomatically silent. Kyra tilted her head back and took in the tiers of bookshelves. "Looks like they've quite a collection."

"Why, Mistress, these volumes are *all* the journal of the Whills. They have been keeping it since they established this colony on Rohakalla some twenty-five thousand years ago."

Kyra almost laughed. She could barely imagine twenty-five years. A thousand times that was way too much. "Yeah, I can see why they'd need lots of storage space."

"The Keepers have been guarding this history the entire time," C-3PO said admiringly. "When volumes become so aged they start to disintegrate, the skilled archivist copies it

verbatim to a new parchment, thus ensuring a continuous and accurate historical record going back farther than anything in the galaxy. I imagine even the Gree archives on Te Hasa can't compare."

Well, Kyra thought silently, if you were stuck in this hole for twenty-five millennia, you'd need *something* to fill the time.

She was about to phrase that more kindly when footsteps pounded the rock behind her. She looked around as Cade Skywalker came through the entrance, followed by Khat Lah.

Cade stopped in his tracks, put hands on his hips, looked around, and said, "A library. I was never big on libraries."

"Welcome, Master Cade," C-3PO said cordially. "As I was just explaining to Mistress Kyra, this chamber contains every volume of the Journal of the Whills, dating back to its inception approximately twenty-five thousand years ago."

"Oh, is that all?" Cade feigned disappointment.

"Is that *all*?" C-3PO flustered. "I dare say, Master Cade, perhaps you don't fully understand what an astonishing find this is from any point of—"

"I get it," Cade waved a hand. "I'm just kidding, professor."

"Oh," said the droid. "I see. In that case, please let me introduce you to E'Cavas, who is currently transcribing all the information Artoo and I provided to the journal."

The Kwa lifted its head from the parchment and hissed.

"He says he is honored meet the Chosen One," C-3PO translated.

"I'm not the karking Chosen One." Cade sighed and looked back to Khat Lah. "What are we here for, anyway?"

Khat Lah opened his mouth and made some hissing noises of his own. E'Cavas apparently understood, because the Kwa stalked over to a shelf in the back of the room and returned with a bound volume. It flipped through the pages with three-clawed hands while the others gathered close. To Kyra each page was a jumble of unreadable alien glyphs.

"I think we're gonna need your help, professor," Cade said.

"Of course," C-3PO said, and when the Kwa stopped flipping pages he leaned in for a closer look. "Hmmm... Yes, I see. Ah ha. How interesting. And when is this particular

entry from?" E'Cavas hissed reply. "Indeed? Why, that is indeed extraordinary."

"What's extraordinary?" asked Kyra.

"This passage, Mistress. It reads, *In a time of darkness / A child will be born / A vessel for the Force / Darkness will be banished / His descendants will hold the balance.*"

"Words on a page," Cade muttered.

"Indeed, but this is a precise copy of the original journal entry, which dates back to approximately fourteen and a half millennia ago. It certainly seems to have notable similarities to the traditional Jedi Order's prophecy of the Chosen One."

"The thing about prophecies is that they're nice and vague." Cade shook his head. "They leave all sorts of open holes you can pour in with whatever you want to read."

"Perhaps," Khat Lah said, "but you sons and daughters of Skywalker can use the Force, where others cannot. Clearly, there is some truth to it."

"Yeah, well," Cade shrugged awkwardly, "Like I said, it's all vague."

"Mentions of the Chosen One are scattered throughout the journal of the Whills," the Yuuzhan Vong said, followed by Kwa hisses for E'Cavas. The Keeper hissed back, apparently in agreement.

"What's going on?" Kyra asked C-3PO.

"How interesting," said the droid. "It seems that E'Cavas will begin searching through the archives for other references to the Chosen One, in hopes of compiling a proper catalogue by the time you return from your... expedition."

"Sounds like a lot of work." Cade patted the droid's shoulder-plate.

"Oh, indeed, Master Cade. According to my calculations there are two thousand, nine-hundred and seventy-one distinct volumes on these shelves. To go over them all and mark any relevant and possibly-relevant would take E'Cavas at least three and a half standard weeks."

"Unless he has help."

"Well, naturally the division of labor--"

"And once he finds those passages we'll need 'em in Basic."

"That goes without say, but--"

“So in other words, this sounds like just the job for you, professor.” Cade slapped his shoulder. “Have fun while we’re gone.”

“Oh,” C-3PO’s mechanical voice trembled, “Oh my.”

Cade patted his astromech’s dome. “Take care of ‘im, will you, Artoo?”

The droid tweeted affirmative, followed by a lower noise, almost cooing.

“Yeah, I’ll miss you too, buddy.” Cade looked to Kyra. “You packed and ready?”

“I am,” she said, turning eyes to the heavy pack on the floor.

“Then let’s get a move on. We’ve waited long enough.”

Kyra looked to Khat Lah, the back to Cade, and nodded.

The Yuuzhan Vong and the Jedi were heading out. Kyra bent low to retrieve her own pack and strapped it over both shoulders before following them through the tunnels. Per Khat Lah’s instructions, she’s provided herself with two weeks’ worth of food- bland rations, mostly- and a pack of emergency medical supplies. Khat Lah had insisted she not bring weapons, and she’d followed his order.

She’d only slipped in one object besides those recommended. Back on Socorro, during the frantic escape from Rav’s treasure-house, an object had fallen into her hands. Though she’d never told anyone else she’d had it, she’d gathered from Lowbacca that the smooth-sided black pyramid was a Sith holocron, one some ancient dark-side wizard had used to record black wisdom inside.

She hadn’t known that when she’d first recovered the artifact. At the time, she’d merely touched it and mystic light had seeped from its edges and converged in the form of a hooded woman. It had been strange and wondrous, her first hint of the larger world to which she belonged, and even though she knew better now she’d recalled that feeling when she’d run her Force-deaf fingers over the smooth surface and stuck it in her bag.

She knew it was dangerous, but she also knew better than to listen to whatever the long-dead Sith woman had to say. She just wanted to touch it one more time and have it spark to life beneath her fingers. When that happened, she’d know the

Force was truly with her, and she could finally do great things.

Adjust the weight on her shoulders, Kyra quickened her pace and followed her guides toward the gate.

When the time came to activate the gate, dozens of Kwa emerged from the warrens and gathered before the arch in what seemed to be reverence. The Yuuzhan Vong gathered as well, and so did the motley collection of seekers who'd found their way to Rohakalla.

Cade Skywalker shared a kiss with Deliah and a back-slapping hug with Jariah, then a big furry handshake with Lowbacca. Kyra engaged Jao in a more solemn embrace. Khat Lah said quiet farewells to his own companions, some of whom snapped wrists to shoulders in a Yuuzhan Vong salute.

Eli had no one to say goodbye to him, but he'd expected that.

The closest he had was Talon, who stood apart from the others and watched only him. He'd accepted Khat Lah's offer to take him through the gate without understanding and without hesitation. His master had been less than pleased. After sharing with him news of the Sith's apparent destruction, she'd whispered to him her plan of fighting past the guards, retaking their ship, flying out of the system and calling whatever Sith survived to this place, where they'd take the gate by force.

The plan reeked of desperation. Even Talon knew it. Maybe they would have been able to fight their way free together; even alone she might stand a chance if she caught her warders by surprise. He'd told her he might not be gone long, because time moved faster on the other side of the gate, but as he stood before it, heavy pack on his shoulders, he felt like he was going on a journey he might not come back from.

Eli found he was okay with that. Without either the Sith or the Force, he felt like he was standing at the edge of an abyss. Now he might get the latter back. He had to take it.

After everyone extricated from their goodbyes, they joined Eli before the towering arch. Khat Lah looked the young man over and snapped, "No. That lightsaber is not allowed."

He touched at the weapon clipped to his belt. "It's mine," he said. "I built it."

"You will not need it where you are going."

Eli was going to point out that Skywalker had his weapon but fought the urge. There was no point in starting this with a fight. He removed his lightsaber with one hand and twisted it in his palm, savoring the feeling for perhaps the last time.

Lowbacca took a few steps forward, ready to retrieve it. Before he got close, Eli whipped his arm overhead and threw. The lightsaber twirled high, then fell into Darth Talon's waiting hand.

Skywalker and Jao scowled, and Lowbacca whuffed disappointment, but Talon grasped the weapon tight. Her stern face didn't change, but Eli felt he'd made small amends.

"Okay," he said, turning back to Khat Lah. "Are we ready now?"

"We are."

"Then how do we start this thing?" It was something he'd long wondered. In all the research and archival material he'd read, nobody had ever been able to figure out how to turn these hypergates on.

"Simple," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "We call on the Force."

He turned to the gate, closed his eyes, and raised a hand toward it. Tense silence fell over the canyon. Nothing seemed to be happening, but Eli turned around to see the Kwa and Yuuzhan Vong repeating the same gesture. The newcomers looked around, mostly in confusion. Deliah seemed frightened and Jariah anxious; Eli saw his hand go instinctively to his blaster.

Then he looked at Cade. Whatever Force power swirled mutely around Eli, Skywalker heard it in full. His face had gone slack, his eyes wide in wonder. Flickers of emotion played across it, and for a moment it looked like he was about to cry, though whether it was from sadness or joy or unspeakable beauty, Eli didn't know. The Force still didn't touch him.

Without noticing it at first, Eli heard a faint humming sound. Finally it became loud enough to draw his attention away from the audience and back to the gate. Pinpoints of light had appeared around the arch's interior, breaking through the

rock at regular intervals. The humming grew louder still until it seemed to rattle the canyon floor and the teeth in his jaw. Straight lines of light shot out from the pinpoints, criss-crossing the form a perfect grid that filled the arch. The beams grew brighter and swelled wider, closing the perfect-square gaps in the grid until the great portal was a wall of blazing light.

Khat Lah lowered his hand, opened his eyes, and said, "Now it is time to go."

He stepped forward first, followed by Skywalker. Eli and Kyra started forward together. He glanced sidelong at the young woman and saw her face slack with awe. He wondered if his own fear was showing.

The four of them stepped close to the wall of light, their boots forming a perfect line. For a second he thought to run back and flee whatever waited for him: transformation, revelation, destruction.

Then Skywalker lifted his foot and made the first step forward. The others followed. Eli took one last breath of mortal air, then moved into the light.



## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

When they dropped out of hyperspace for the seventh time, the Je'daii wanderers were greeted by a world wreathed in flame.

The previous jumps had all been smooth but draining. The twenty-nine Tythan Je'daii, strapped in their crash couches or monitoring systems aboard their refitted Rakatan gunship, had melded minds together and commanded the alien vessel to propel itself past lightspeed. The jumps got longer and longer, and each one got progressively more tiring. The Rakata had built their ships to be powered by dark side energies extracted from tortured prisoners, and it sometimes felt like this one was urging them toward pain. Each time they dropped out of hyperspace it was a relief, and they'd take their time before beginning the next jump along the path laid out by their Tho Yor guides. Each time they'd arrive at a new location in deep space, and each time the surrounding stars would seem dimmer, the blackness around them greater. The Je'daii understood they were being pulled out of the galactic core, into regions where stars were less densely-packed. Likely, these were the systems their ancestors had been pulled from long ago.

Some Je'daii wondered if they might find their long-lost homeworlds, and their anticipation grew. Lanoree Brock wasn't among them. Each jump pained her. Sometimes she felt like she was falling out of the universe; other times she thought she was slipping back in time and space to that cavern in Tython's Old City where she'd killed her brother.

She hadn't told anyone yet that she'd brought Dal's ancient device aboard. Supposedly it was the power generator for a Gree hypergate, though in truth neither she, Dal, nor any Je'daii Master knew the truth of it.

For the seventh jump, Lanoree volunteered to be part of the team monitoring the ship's systems. Master Quan-Jang, leader of the mission, was one of the other five Je'daii awake for this jump and Lanoree joined him in what was apparently the ship's bridge. One broad, curved wall was transparent. Consoles and a single thronelike command chair were turned to face it. Lanoree had never seen hyperspace before, and the first sight of it took her breath away. Stars became streaks of white that erased space's black. When the white became overwhelming it flashed and disappeared, replaced by ghostly swirls of blue and white light.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Quan-Jang had whispered beside her.

Lanoree hadn't disagreed. She'd stared at the mysterious vortex through which they plunged. Wonder returned strength and clarity of mind. During the jump- which lasted several hours, their longest yet- she began to feel confident in this mission once more.

And when they dropped out of hyperspace that vanished in an instant.

The planet that exploded to view in front of them was a great ocean-blue sphere, streaked with swirls of cloud-white and dotted by small dark islands. It sat moonless against the stars, but it was not without company. Explosions were bursting in its lower orbit, beautiful chains of short-lived scarlet and gold.

The five Tho Yor, which had exited hyperspace dead ahead of their ship as usual, plunged toward the planet and the fray.

Quan-Jang refused to sit in the command chair of a dead Rakatan tyrant, but he gripped the seat-back tightly as he stared at the conflagration. Clearly, the Tho Yor meant for them to plunge in. They'd tested evasive maneuvers and even fired weapons above Tython, but they'd never taken this ship through any real combat.

"Ranger Brock," he said, "Go wake Ranger Ryo. Get him up here. And bring three more, enough people to man the weapons. Everyone else must stay as they are."

Lanoree understood; they needed many minds working in union to pilot the ship, now more than ever. She raced back to the vaulted hall where the other Je'daii lay in their mind meld. Hawk woke easily; the other three Je'daii struggled more, but in the end she led them all back to the bridge.

The battle was all around them now. The five Tho Yor had pulled ahead. The eight-spoked wheels on their upper flanks had turned aglow and were spewing blasts of destructive energy, as they had during the defense of Tython. As Lanoree watched one starship burst into flame she realized their targets were the same as well. These were Rakata vessels they were fighting, many of them ovoid, three-armed gunships like the one the Je'daii had commandeered. The Rakata were attempting a counterattack, and several began bombing runs that tore fiery pits in the Tho Yor's seemingly-impenetrable black-stone surface.

Yet the arrival of the Tho Yor had given the Rakata's enemies a chance to regroup and stage their own counterattack. Lanoree quickly noticed that there were two distinct types of ships, surely the product of different civilizations and neither like anything she'd seen back home. Some craft were sleek of ovoid and trailed long fans made from a shimmering translucent material. Others had long segmented bodies like insects and were propelled by fiery thrust engines rather than solar sails. In the far distance, half-silhouetted against the blue of the planet, she spotted great flying discs that seemed to have layered cities mounted atop them. It was hard to measure, but they looked larger than any spacecraft she'd ever seen.

The insectoid starship and the ones with solar sails all had weapons, and they were all attacking the Rakata. They gave the Tho Yor a wide berth, apparently unfamiliar with the devices, but they relished the confusion it brought to their enemies. As one large Rakatan warship exploded, cheers rang out from the Je'daii on the bridge.

Lanoree wasn't one to celebrate, and neither was Quan-Jang. He asked, "Ranger Ryo, can you communicate with those Tho Yor? Can they tell us what's going on?"

"I'll try," the Twi'lek said, and Lanoree could feel him concentrate in the Force.

She concentrated as well, locking eyes on the nearest Tho Yor and searching for the half-familiar essence of Tasha Ryo. She'd barely known the young seer in life; now she was incomparably changed. The Tho Yor were like volcanos of raw Force energy and each blast carried a whiff of Tasha, but only that. There was so much ancient magic in those black stone arks; the Twi'lek woman was just a small thing inside them.

The Rakata continued to fight and they fought viciously. One large cruiser, harried by attacks from small sailing vessels, pitched toward a Tho Yor and increased speed. That ark was already battling another batch of Rakatan ships and unable to defend itself. Lanoree almost cried aloud, begging the Tho Yor to flee, but it was too late. The Rakatan ship slammed into it, breaking the black-stone casing open.

What came next was pain. The Tho Yor's dying agony stabbed into the minds of the Je'daii, both on the bridge and in their meditation beds. The entire gunship tremored as they temporarily lost control. The Tho Yor broke apart into smoldering pieces and the dying echoes receded slowly in the Je'daii's minds, but the fight continued fiercer than ever.

That was when the battle finally came for them. The Rakatan ships, assuming the Je'daii one of their own, had ignored them until now. It was a pack of the segmented warships that fell on them, peppering their hull with laser blasts. The Je'daii pilots, distracted from the meld, struggled to evade.

"Communications, try broadcasting on every signal we know," Quan-Jang snapped.

The Rakatan transmission technology had been one of the easiest things to learn on this ship, but that was no guarantee of success. Lanoree took command of the comm console and began a wide-range broadcast that pleading with their attackers to cease firing. It flashed through space in every language spoken on Tython, but none of it merited any reply from the attackers.

They'd also programmed the computer to produce accurate translations into the Rakatan tongue. Lanoree had no idea how well it worked, but it was the last thing left to try. She broadcasted the message in Rakatan as the ship continued to

shudder under enemy fire. A few more direct blows and their grand, ambitious quest would come to a pathetic end.

But the firing stopped. The console's holo-projector came to life and Lanoree found herself staring at a flickering blue face with leathery skin and reptilian eyes above a short snout. She'd only seen a face like it once before.

"The holocron!" she snapped. "Where's that Kwa holocron?"

"I've got it!" Hawk said and sprinted out of the room.

As Lanoree waited, the Kwa in the ship behind them spoke in a strange hissing tongue. She understood none of it, but thankfully Hawk returned a moment later, cradling the device shaped like a miniature Tho Yor.

He stroked its smooth sides. The image of a second Kwa appeared and said, "Peace. I am A'ng of the Kwa, last of the Tython Kwa, master of the holocron. Ask, seeker, and I will guide you."

"Master A'ng," Quan-Jiang said, "The Tho Yor had guided us out of the Tython system. We have encountered some of your race! Please explain our situation and tell them we are friendly!"

Hawk held the holocron in front of the comm device. The Kwa in the other ship seemed to blink surprise at the sight of its own kin. A'ng's holocron began to speak to it in the same hissing language. Though taken aback, the other Kwa replied.

Lanoree understood nothing of the conversation, but the Kwa ships behind them had at least stopped firing. That gave some relief, but not for long. A stab of pain echoed through the Force, rupturing the meld. Every Je'daii on the ship cringed and shuddered, and they knew another Tho Yor had been destroyed.

Nonetheless, there were still three arks left, and they all sprayed destruction at the remaining Rakatan ships. The Rakata were more outnumbered than ever, and when Lanoree looked out the viewport she saw that three of the flying disc-shaped cities had drawn close. They were indeed bigger than anything she'd ever seen, kilometers in diameter, and while not bristling with weaponry the cannons mounted on their edges delivered another layer of punishment to the Rakata.

As the holocron and the Kwa completed their conversation, the last enemy ships broke away from the blue planet. They soared past the two broken Tho Yor, past the swarming Kwa ships and their solar-sail allies, and once they were clear of the fight they winked out of existence and disappeared into hyperspace.

The withdrawal took some five minutes, and their enemies harried them all the way. Once the last was gone the only Rakatan ship in sight was the Je'daii's own. Both types of ships encircled them and it was hard not to feel threatened, but Lanoree could feel something of their occupants in the Force. The minds were strange and alien but not malicious. She felt caution and curiosity but no ill will.

The remaining three Tho Yor drifted back toward them, as though assuring protection. Lanoree tried to hail them but got no response. Hawk stroked the holocron back to life and asked, "Master A'ngang, what did you tell the Kwa? Do they realize we're friend?"

"They realize it, but they must decide your fate for themselves."

"Master," asked Lanoree, "Do you know why the Tho Yor led us here? We're above an ocean world."

"There are countless of those in this galaxy," the holo-image shook its head. "I cannot advise you on your location, nor the intentions of the Tho Yor. I am not A'ngang in truth, just a catalog of his knowledge. Some truths are beyond me."

There was no encouragement there. The Je'daii waited and watched until the comm console chimed with a fresh hail. A Kwa face- the same as before or not, they couldn't tell- appeared and began to speak.

They needed the holocron to translate. It listened, then said, "Archon O'Vekem of the Kwa Holdings would speak with you in person to determine your intentions."

"We're very much willing," said Quan-Jang. "Tell us how to proceed."

After a short exchange in Kwa, the holocron said, "Archon O'Vekem extends his invitation at the request of the Counselor Alotak't of the Gree Empire. They offer to host three of your delegates aboard the Belak'k Nedor."

Lanoree's mind snagged on the word *Gree* and refused to move further, but Quan-Jang asked, "Can you explain? What is the, ah, Belak'k Nedor?"

Another short exchange in Kwa. Then A'ng's image said, "It is the spacecraft ten degrees and fifty thousand kilometers off your bow."

Eyes went back to the viewport and found the only thing the holocron could be referring to, the nearest of the giant city-discs. At this range it was easy to say they made even the Tho Yor look miniscule.

"Tell the Kwa we'll be happy to conference with them. I'm sure we have a lot to explain to each other," Quan-Jang said, and let the holocron translate it. To the Je'daii he said, "Rangers Brock and Ryo, you're with me. We're going to engage in some diplomacy." He looked at the holocron in Hawk's hands. "And make sure you bring that along."

One holocron felt like small protection as the Je'daii sent their sole scout craft into the maw of the great Gree city-ship. The Tython-made Hunter starfighter had been refitted for passengers, but at two riders and a pilot it already felt cramped. Doors opened in the side of the Belak'k Nedor's lower level. Once they flew through the door closed, and the chamber beyond was became filled with the roar of inrushing atmosphere.

Lanoree, in the pilot's seat, checked the Hunter's sensors. "Looks like breathable oxygen. That's a good start."

"We'll need more than that," said Quan-Jang. "Hawk, have you sensed anything more from the Tho Yor?"

"Something." The Tw'lek's brows drew together. "I'm getting this sense of... satisfaction. Congratulations for a job well-done."

"I'm getting that too," Lanoree said. "It's faint, but there." Communicating with the person inside those Tho Yor had been hard at first, but after navigating six jumps it had become more natural.

"Apparently we're at the place we're meant to be then," Quan-Jiang said.

"The right time too, apparently," said Hawk.

Lanoree wasn't sure what the implications of that were. Whoever created the Tho Yor could never have imagined a single Je'daii ship could stumble on the Kwa and Gree at this exact planet, at this exact moment when they needed help against the Rakata.

At least, she didn't think they could, but nothing was certain anymore.

When the chamber was fully oxygenated, the three Je'daii disembarked the Hunter. A single door opened on the far side of the chamber. As they stepped toward it, six creatures emerged. Each rose taller than a human and slithered on four thick tentacles; two more were lifted like arms and held long staffs. Red robes draped down their bodies, hiding torsos—assuming they had torsos at all. A metal shell was wrapped like a scarf around the lower halves of their faces but the upper halves of their heads were visible. Giant all-black eyes stared, unblinking, while thick organic sacs seemed to fall off their heads and halfway down their backs.

So these were Gree. They were as alien as anything Lanoree had ever seen. She had so many questions she wanted to ask them. None had to do with their mission; they were all about Dal and the device he'd died to make.

But that wasn't for her to decide. Master Quan-Jang was in charge here. The six Gree, apparently honor-guards, led them down a long corridor with wide walls arching overhead and a smooth red carpet. Lanoree tried to match what little she saw of their architecture with the Old City on Tython but couldn't be sure of anything.

Eventually they were led to another chamber. This was one circular, and a bulbous transparent wall looked out on space and the blue planet beneath them. There were only two beings waiting for them: one six-tentacled Gree in green robes and one blue-scaled saurian Kwa in a black hooded cloak. Each stood far taller than a human, and their alien eyes tracked the two Je'daii as they entered the room, communicating nothing.

On Tython they'd been taught these races had been ancient architects that had shaped the galaxy and even helped found the Je'daii order. They were myths, legends, echoes, ghosts, the things Dal had died to chase. And now Lanoree was



standing in a room with them. He legs went weak beneath her and it was a trial to stand.

It was no smooth conference. The Je'daii spoke nothing the Kwa or Gree could understand. Their languages, in turn, were only decipherable by the holocron. Master Quan-Jang led the conversation and gave the device instruction as necessary. With help from Master A'nan's image, he explained where the Je'daii had come from, how they'd battled the Rakata, and why they'd followed the Tho Yor out of their home system.

The Gree and Kwa had a story of their own. Their two species had been lifted up and spread across the stars by someone else. The translation through the holocron was uncertain, but they seemed to speak of the elder civilization with an almost religious reverence. These gods, if that was what they were, had departed a long time ago. Their former servants had fallen to squabbling; for a time the Gree and Kwa had been enemies.

That changed when the Kwa accidentally spread their technology to the Force-imbued, power-hungry, and vicious Rakata. Lanoree had already heard this story from the holocron. Literally fueled the Force's dark side, the Rakata had overrun wide swathes of the galaxy. They'd brought horror wherever they went, and the Kwa and Gree had frantically set about destroying their galaxy-crossing, matter-transporting gates lest the Rakata use them. Still, the damage had been done. For thousands of years the Rakata had reigned supreme, chasing the Gree and Kwa back to their ancestral homeworlds.

Only a few of those ancient species still roamed the stars. These were such exceptions. Their own peoples' records were spotty but they'd banded together to chase down the last remaining gates and destroy them. When the Je'daii spoke of the infinity gate beneath the Chasm on Tython, the Kwa archon O'Vekem trilled in recognition. That was one gate, she said, that her people had never been able to locate. She was glad it had been destroyed. They'd come to this ocean world to destroy another gate. The Gree had nearly finished dismantling their arch when the Rakata appeared. In the fighting retreat that followed, most of the gate's pieces

had been recovered and stored aboard their ship. The Rakata had chased them relentlessly, aiming to capture the device and rebuild the gate. The arrival of the Tho Yor and the Je'daii had been like divine deliverance.

As she listened to the holocron's translation, Lanoree marvelled at the coincidence of it all and found herself wondering if it had been only that.

Now that the discussion had turned to the gates, Lanoree couldn't control herself. She told the holocron, "Please, ask the Gree. Did they ever build one of their hypergates on Tython?"

The holocron, using Master A'nang's image, repeated the question in the clicking, gurgling language of the Gree. Their green-robed delegate, Alotak't, replied in turn, writhing its arm-tentacles as it did so.

The holocron translated, "The Gree once had a presence on the world you call Tython. Whether a hypergate was ever built, they cannot say. That was a very long time ago."

Still no answers. Lanoree was deflated yet knew any answer would have brought her little peace. Dal was dead; his vain dream had driven him mad and she had killed him. All the discoveries she made out here wouldn't undo that fact.

"We have a device," she said. "It appears to be some... dark matter injector. We think it might have been a power core to one of your hypergates."

The Gree squealed, apparently in surprise, but it was nothing like the shock Quan-Jang fixed her with. The Master put a hand on her shoulder and said, "You need to explain that to me, Ranger Brock. Right now."

Though the Gree and Kwa couldn't understand their speech, they stepped aside anyway and lowered their voices. They left Hawk holding the holocron, but he didn't try to continue conversation with the Gree. Instead his attention seemed elsewhere.

Holding her shoulders, Quan-Jang asked Lanoree, "How did we get a Gree dark matter generator aboard our ship?"

She stared into the lenses of his dark eye-glasses and swallowed. "The device was my brother's sir. He recovered it--"

"I know what Dalien Brock did. How did it get *here*?"

"Master Dam-Powl gave it to me. She said we'd have better use of it out here than anyone would on Tython." She hesitated, then added, "She also thought it would be safer here, given the schism happening among the Je'daii."

Quan-Jang's face twisted to a scowl. "She shouldn't have done that, especially not without the consultation of the Council. You just accepted her gift, did you?"

"I did," Lanoree nodded. "She was my Master, you know."

He nodded, but she sensed he also knew the real reason. That device was the last piece of Dal in this universe. It could yet give meaning to his life, and thus to her own. She could no more abandon it than she could abandon herself.

Behind them, Alotak't squealed, and the holocron said, "The Gree are quite interested in seeing the dark matter injection device."

Turning toward them Lanoree said, "I don't *actually* know what it is. That's just what... we Je'daii thought."

As the holocron translated, Hawk said, "I think that may have to wait."

Lanoree and Quan-Jang circled back to face him. He still held the holocron but his eyes were lifted, staring past the viewport at a Tho Yor's drifting diamond, black against the planet's blue.

"Is it talking to you?" asked Lanoree.

"*She* is," the Twi'lek said hoarsely. "She's beckoning. Telling us to follow again."

"You mean another hyperspace jump?"

"Yes." He blinked and refocused his eyes. "Tasha says to bring our new friends."

Lanoree had barely seen anything of this galaxy, but she had a feeling the armada assembled over this ocean world was the first ever of its kind.

The lone Rakatan gunship, commandeered by the Je'daii, sat among segmented Kwa cruisers, Gree gunships trailing glimmering sails, and three giant disc-shaped city-ships. In front of them all, leading them away from the blue planet and toward black space, were a pair of Tho Yor.

The third great ark lingered behind everything. From the Rakatan ship's bridge, the Je'daii couldn't directly see it

descend into the planet, but their sensors registered its steady plunge into the atmosphere, down into endless oceans.

"I still don't understand," Lanoree shook her head. "Why is it abandoning us now? What's left here on this world? The Gree said they took apart their gate."

"The Tho Yor have always been a mystery," grunted Quan-Jang. "I doubt it will ever be different."

They looked to Hawk, seeking some hint. The Twi'lek shook his head. "All I feel from that Tho Yor is... farewell."

"Do you still feel Tasha in it?" asked Lanoree.

"I do. And I feel her in the ones ahead... beckoning."

"Are they giving us a direction?" asked Quan-Jang.

"Yes. I can feel it."

Lanoree could feel it too. "We'd better strap back in with the others. Join the meld."

"I'll stay here and man the bridge," Quan-Jang said. "Someone has to make sure ours friends follow."

O'Vekem and Alotak't both had given the Je'daii tracking devices to place on their ship. The Gree and Kwa would follow them to whatever their destination was. Lanoree was surprised they'd trusted the mysterious newcomers so quickly, and she'd said as much.

Both Gree and Kwa had explained that the Tho Yor recalled icons of their own mythology. Eight-sided double-pyramids were said to drift the stars, sent as messengers from their departed gods. Some said the drifting devices were transports that gathered the faithful. Others said they were the homes of the gods themselves.

It was all a muddle, and Lanoree was coming to realize that just as the Je'daii understood little of their origins, the same could be said of these beings. Dal had thought these ancient ones could unlock to the key to everything, but they were just as lost.

The well of the past was deep. Maybe it had no bottom. Maybe understanding would never come and Lanoree would die like her brother, groping desperately for knowledge that could never be hers.

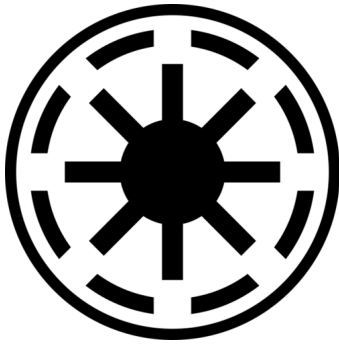
The thought filled her with sadness, and also fear. There was nothing she could do about either. Grimly, Lanoree left

the bridge and followed Hawk to the meditation vault, where most of the other Je'daii were strapped into their couches.

She joined them. It was easier to fall into the meld this time, and it was easier to sense the living essence inside those Tho Yor ahead. The Tho Yor gave direction; the Je'daii followed. As their ship lurched into hyperspace Lanoree's mind was spread out with all the others' yet searching inside itself. She was looking for knowledge, for peace, and for balance. She dared hope some of it might be ahead.



## PART II



THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GATE





## Chapter Eleven

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As if in defiance of the tense political situation, a steady flow of civilian traffic continued to pulse in, out, and around Coruscant. Seen from the right approach vector, the planet was equally split between daylight and night, with one half a bisected sphere a gleaming metal jewel, the other a collection of bright electric swirls against black. All around it, tiny lights marking starship drives continued to swarm.

It had been a long time since Marin Skirata had seen Coruscant with her own eyes, and she tried to think exactly how long. As Marin Solo she'd mostly avoided the Core, instead crisscrossing the Outer and Mid Rim with Ania and Benet on their cargo ship. As Marin Fel she'd likewise mostly made her home on the galaxy's edges. She could probably count on one hand the times she'd been to the capital, and the latest must have been almost twenty years ago.

She'd forgotten what this place felt like in the Force. As they dipped through the planet's orbit and vectored for Galactic City, which for now lay on the planet's night-black half, she felt almost assaulted by so much life. A trillion individual selves, each with individual wants and desire and goals, frustrations and griefs and loneliness, all combined to make one chaotic whole. As they rocked through atmospheric entry she closed her eyes and tried to pick out just one signal against so much noise. She couldn't; it was simply too difficult, and she was beginning to wonder if she'd be much good on this journey after all.

Marin resolved not to give in so easily. Old as she was, she was still capable of learning new tricks.

She opened her eyes to watch as they came in for landing. They'd decided to use *Starlight Champion* for this mission, and she'd handed over the pilot controls of her father's ship- a rare occasion- to Hondo Karr so she could immerse herself in the Force. Stirring in her chair behind Hondo, she glanced sideways at the man in the other passenger seat. Ganner Krieg's suspicious eyes darted away from hers. With an inward sigh, Marin decided she'd best get it over with soon.

They set *Starlight Champion* down at the reconstructed Eastport docking complex. Ganner knew Galactic City better than anyone, and he claimed that the government district was a twenty-minute airspeeder ride away in good traffic. More likely, he admitted, it would take twice as long. Marin didn't mind the distance. They were trying to look as innocuous as possible, and nobody in their crew- six humans and one Mon Calamari- would attract much notice unless they put on Mando armor, which was right now sealed in the cargo section. The only reason people would glance at *Champ* would be for its antique design.

As the ship powered down on the landing pad, Hondo stretched and looked back at his passengers. "Stage one accomplished. When do we get to stage two?"

"What time is it local?" asked Ganner.

From the co-pilot's chair, Sauk reported, "Zero-two-hundred hours. Not exactly prime business hours."

"No, but they're good for R&R." Hondo got up from his seat and made his way toward the back hold.

Marin got up and followed. "What exactly are you planning, Hondo?"

"Nothing to interfere with the mission, believe me. Just tourist stuff."

He reached the crew lounge, where the rest of the team was assembled. Tes Vevec and her brother Oren wore plain tunics and jackets, while Marin's nephew Yangar had a drab brown jumpsuit. They were all hardened Mandalorians, but anybody would mistake them for the average spacers.

Stepping up to his wife and taking her hand, Hondo said, "Well, *vode*, we are safe on the ground and it is party time in

Galactic City. I'm told there's a not-too-shabby entertainment district located right next to Eastport, to the north and downlevel."

Marin crossed her arms. "You're not being paid to go barhopping."

"Don't worry, *ba'vodu*," said Yangar, "I won't let 'em do anything too stupid."

"Because we won't," Hondo nodded. "Like I said, we're tourists. We don't come this way very often, so we might as well see the sights. You said yourself you won't need us for the first day."

"We probably won't," Marin admitted.

"Then I say we stretch our legs and knock back a few *buy'ce gal*," said Oren.

Marin knew trying to corral willful Mandos was a fool's errand, so she let them off. They were right as far as it went; the coming day was about getting the lay of the land.

After they traipsed nosily out of the ship, Marin turned to see Sauk and Ganner behind her, expectant. She didn't like being seen as the leader of this mission so she asked Ganner, "When do you want to go visit the Jedi Temple? That is your first step, isn't it?"

"I think it's my best route to Master Sinde," the Imperial Knight nodded. The shaved-bald dome of his head gleamed ivory in the overhead lights. "The Temple has separate security apparatus than the other government buildings, and it's located a kilometer or so away from the rest."

"The Jedi like their privacy."

"They do." Ganner gave her another lingering look. "I'd like to go inside under cover of darkness, just in case."

"I understand. That's still, what, four hours away?"

"Right. I slept on the way here, so I'm fine to get going soon."

"All right." She glanced at Sauk. "What about you?"

"I'm going to approach my contacts during normal business hours," the Mon Cal said. "I want to make my visit look as legitimate as possible."

"Makes sense. Do you plan on catching rack time until then?"

"That was my plan."

"Then you'd better get to it."

The Mon Cal nodded and excused himself. Now it was down to just Marin and Ganner.

He looked at her. She looked at him. Finally she said, "Let's step outside for some fresh air. I figure we should have a talk."

Night wind blew across the landing platform, and on first whiff Marin couldn't call it actually fresh. Coruscant's pollution-scrubbing system was the best in the galaxy, but the air was still rank with the smells of rust and metal, speeder exhaust and starship fuel. It was a long way from the air of Concord Dawn, Surcaris, and the other barely-settled Mandalorian colonies she'd spent the past decade on.

For Ganner, though, this was home sweet home, and she could feel some of his tension disperse as he looked out on the glittering skyline. Even at two in the morning, the lights were bright and the speeder traffic ringing the port was thick.

Standing beside him, arms crossed and looking out at the night, Marin said, "You can probably guess what I am, can't you?"

Ganner stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't be coy. Everyone else on this boat already knows. It's awkward having to tiptoe around it with you and I don't want it to get in the way of the mission."

"All right. You're Ania Solo's mother, aren't you?"

"I am."

"And you're a Skywalker."

"I never thought of myself as one, but apparently I am."

"That means you can use the Force."

"I can."

Ganner went silent as he processed confirmed suspicion. What he said next surprised her. "I envy you."

"The Force doesn't solve all your problems. For a long time I thought it made more than it created, so I pushed it away." Quietly she added, "I spent thirty years refusing to use the Force at all. That's almost half my life."

"If I can ask... were you related to Roan Fel?"

"First cousins. He press-ganged me into a mission once. Had me go to Mandalore..."

"Ah," Ganner said, so soft she could barely hear.

"I guess you know about that."

"Somewhat. So your father—"

"Arlen Fel. Roan's uncle. He wasn't Imperial Knight material and took us out of the Empire to settle on Ossus for a while." To ward off further prying she added, "That was all a really long time ago."

Ganner thought a moment and asked, "Do you know Master Sinde?"

"Yes, but not well. I'd probably recognize a few more faces in the Jedi Temple."

"Do you want to come with me tomorrow?"

She'd thought about that the whole ride here and hadn't come up with a good answer. Softly she said, "I've been keeping apart from the Jedi- and the Sith, and Alliance and the Empire and all that- for a lot of years."

"But you came here, now."

"Call it a family obligation." Those came on all sides for her.

"Have you ever met Marasiah?"

"No." Wind and silence blew between them. She noted, "You called her by her first name."

"I meant the empress."

"You meant Marasiah." She glanced at him. "You care about her personally, not just as your boss."

"We've been through a lot together. Her husband and I were... good friends."

She'd heard about had happened to him, and she felt Ganner's ache through the Force. All Marin could say was, "I'm sorry."

She felt his frustration too, his smoldering anger. His hands balled to fists as he said, "Since I lost the Force... I feel like I've been fraying apart. I need to have it back again. I feel like I'll break if I don't."

It was a stunningly honest admission to someone he barely knew. Marin put a hand on his arm and passed soothing thoughts through the Force. "Ania tells me Cade Skywalker is looking for a way to get it back. She said he's getting close."

"Really?" Ganner sounded like he didn't dare believe. "You mean they found Khat Lah?"

“That’s what Ania says.” She gave his arm a brief squeeze. “She says to keep it quiet for now. Secret business. So you can’t go blabbing to the Jedi or to Sinda.”

“I won’t,” Ganner said, suddenly light with hope.

“And don’t go spilling my secret either.” She squeezed again and released.

“Your secret... so you won’t go with me to the Jedi Temple tomorrow.”

“I don’t think so. I need time to meditate. To acclimatize. If I’m going to be of use here- if the Force is going to be of use- I need to train and be ready.”

Ganner looked at her, eyes narrowed in the dark. “Karr said you were a Mandalorian mercenary. The leader of their band that overthrew Yaga Auchu.”

“I was.”

She felt Ganner consider several possible responses before saying, “That doesn’t sound very... meditative.”

“It wasn’t.” She looked back to the cityscape and opened herself, just a little, to the rush of teeming life. “That’s why I need time to practice. To get it right.”

In itself, it was not unusual for Treis Sinda to receive a visit from Astraal Vao. When she came to his office, however, the regent’s aide reported that a request had come for Treis to visit the Jedi Temple at his earliest convenience.

That was a flag in itself. Treis knew Astraal’s brother was a Jedi, which allotted her special connection with the Order, but only the unofficial kind. That she’d come to ask him in person instead of using the comm was also curious. When he prodded for more information, Astraal had simply deflected it with vague verbiage about the Jedi requiring his unique expertise. The former Imperial missionary had learned a few things about bureaucratic obfuscation.

Treis had an opening in his schedule at midday, and he took a short ride on his personal landspeeder over to the Temple. Astraal hadn’t needed to tell him to come alone. The Jedi pyramid looked dignified but also lonely as he approached. He was recognized on entry and was escorted deep inside the building by a middle-aged human dressed in brown robes. The halls were indeed emptier than those in the

Imperial Knight academy, and he didn't see a single child in padawan's whites. He wondered how long the Jedi could last like this, a purely monastic order seeking vainly to touch a Force that had withdrawn from them. The Imperial Knights at least had a government to serve; the Jedi had nothing.

Treis was unsurprised to step into a dimly lit meditation chamber and see the long, tusked face of K'Kruhk, eldest member of the Jedi Order and its leader. The old Whiphid had been triumvir of the Galactic Federation along with Marasiah and Gar Stazi, but upon losing the Force he'd withdrawn. Aside from expressing formal condolences at Marasiah's funeral, he'd been notably silent about the status of the former triumvirs.

For a second Treis thought their meeting would be about that. Then he saw a second the second figure in the chamber, a tall bald human dressed in a civilian tunic. The figure turned toward Treis and his face was familiar in the low light, but it still took a heartbeat to identify him.

"Ganner?" Treis gasped, then corrected himself. "Master Krieg. I am... very happy to see you."

"Are you really?" Ganner took no steps closer.

"I would better say I'm relieved. Is Master Rae well?"

"Yes, but she's not on Coruscant."

Ganner's tone was guarded. Treis looked to K'Kruhk but that Whiphid face was unreadable. He spread his hands and said, "You have nothing to fear from me, Master Krieg. Since your last call I've been dying to hear from you. You left me with a lot of questions. I hope you've come to answer them."

"That depends," said Ganner. "What has Hogrum Chalk said about us?"

"He's very interested in finding you. He's had me ask the other Knights for clues to your whereabouts."

"Did he send Imperial Knights out to search for us?"

"No. He's been... reticent to send us on field work, until recently. Master Val is heading a search for Senator Derrol." He ventured to ask, "Do you know anything about Derrol?"

"Nothing. Has Chalk implicated Azlyn and me in the bombing?"

Treis blinked. "No. He hasn't."

"Has he *hinted* at it?"

"No. And we've spoken about you two every day."

"You have?"

"Among other things, yes." Treis glanced at the Jedi. "If this is a conversation for just the two of us..."

"No. Master K'Kruhk deserves to know. I've already told him the important parts."

"You wouldn't have called me here if you didn't think you could trust me. You *do* trust me, don't you Master Krieg?"

The younger man exhaled. "I don't think I have a choice."

So he told it. He talked about how he and Azlyn had been sent to question Senator Derrol- apparently without Chalk's knowledge- and how they'd been on their way to report to Marasiah in her personal quarters when by luck they spotted Hogrum walking her away with cuffs on her hands and a stormtrooper escort- one of which was wearing a ysalamiri in harness. Minutes later, the bomb had gone off.

If was everything Treis had been dreading to hear. "You're telling me this was a *coup*. That means Stazi and the others are about to be tried for something they didn't do."

Softly K'Kruhk pointed out, "They are also being tried for the murder of Antares Draco."

"Azlyn and I determined the Sith were behind that. We just couldn't get proof. There was no evidence Stazi or the Alliance senators had any connection," Ganner said darkly.

"Hogrum says he obtained proof from Darth Havok. Master Rae captured him herself."

"And where is Havok now?"

"Dead," Treis muttered. He'd known Eshkar Niin, trusted him, and been shocked by his fall. He felt no pity for Elliah's killer, but he wished Hogrum had spared the man, if only so Treis could listen to his lies and try to sort out the truth first-hand. Now all he had to rely on was Hogrum's word.

"The bombing and the trial are all part of a sham to purge Chalk's enemies," Ganner said. "It makes sense, Master Sinde, you have to admit that."

"Perhaps. But all I have is your word on this. I'm sorry, Ganner, but I'll have to have more."

"I have a place to start." Ganner reached into his pocket and took out a datacard. "If they're holding Marasiah somewhere



they have to be using ysalamiri. And ysalamiri need special native foods to keep alive.”

“I wasn’t aware of that. I haven’t dealt with the creatures.”

“I have, on rare occasion,” said K’Kruhk. “Master Krieg speaks truly.”

Ganner pressed, “On this datacard is sensor information from a pirate’s nest over Myrkr, the ysalamiri homeworld. It tracks ships coming and going from the planet, and there aren’t many of those. If you check this card, you’ll see I’ve marked two points with timestamps. These indicate the time Myrkr was visited by an IC-2 scoutcraft. One ten days before the coup, one the day of. Chalk should have everything he needs to line his cage for a while.”

An IC-2 was commonly used by Imperial intelligence agents slumming as civilians. It was also used by civilians, the Alliance, and more. Treis reached out and cautiously took the card. “What do you think I can do with this?”

“You can guess a time window when a ship inbound from Myrkr would reach Coruscant. Look for IC-2s arriving at the same time. Try to find matches for both.”

“I don’t have access to everything Chalk’s security people do.”

“No, but you’re head of the Imperial Knights. You can at least bully information out of orbital control to find out if and when these ships came through, right?”

“Perhaps,” Treis allowed. “What makes you certain Marasiah is on Coruscant?”

“If you were Chalk, would you let her far from your sights?”

It was a good point. If the empress truly was alive and held prisoner, it was probably somewhere beneath the government district, probably the palace itself.

As he took the card, a sick part of Treis wished she *wasn’t* alive. If Ganner was a madman or just mistaken it would be tragic, but a tragedy he’d spent the past two weeks gradually acclimatizing himself to. If Ganner was speaking truth, his best friend’s daughter had been betrayed by someone he’d known and trusted for forty years. Worse, the crisis in the Federation was more complicated and dangerous than he’d dreaded.

But Treis had one certainty. He'd served the Fel dynasty all his life. First Davek, then Roan, then Marasiah, and he'd loved all three: one as an icon of virtue, one as a friend, one as the closest thing he had to a daughter.

His hand closed around the card. "I'll do what I can, Master Krieg. It may take some time... I'm a busy man and I don't want to arouse Chalk's suspicion."

"I understand. The Jedi have offered me shelter here."

Treis wanted to ask other questions: how he'd gotten to Coruscant, whether he'd brought friends, what Azlyn was doing. Of course he couldn't ask any of them. Instead he pocked the card and said, "I'll probably use Astraal Vao to route messages to you. It's safer than making trips here."

"That's perfectly fine."

"Does she know about any of those?"

"No," said K'Kruhk. "No one knows, outside of we three."

"Then I suggest we keep it that way for now. There's no sense letting rumors fly, especially when we don't have proof of anything."

"I agree." The Whiphid twitched his shaggy head. "I'm sorry, Master Sinde, but I'm afraid the Jedi will not be lending their... assistance to the upcoming trial."

"I quite understand. Frankly, Master Dare will be relieved."

Ganner, who knew Sigel's Imperial ardor, allowed a tiny smile. "Thank you for this, Master Sinde. We owe you more than we can say."

"You owe me nothing," Treis said firmly. "There will be no accounts to settle... not until this is done."

And that, he knew, was a long way off. As he made his way out of the Temple and back to the government palace, the miniscule weight of the datacard in his pocket felt as dangerous as a baradium bomb. Even worse was the knowledge that it was far more explosive than any warhead could ever be.

After ending his conversation with Sinde, Ganner made his way through the Jedi Temple's hollow halls, back to the spartan room where he'd been assigned to stay. He was surprised by the figure waiting beside the door. Master

K'Kruhk has spoken truly back there when he'd said only the three in that room knew about Marasiah's survival. Shado Vao didn't know that much, but he knew that something was up.

The blue-skinned Twi'lek leaned against the wall beside the door, arms crossed. When he saw Ganner approach he lifted his head, but only slightly. His expression was slack, his eyes sullen. The Shado that Ganner had worked with during the war against Krayt had been honorable and just, level-headed and loyal to the mandates of his order. In some ways, he'd reminded Ganner of himself.

Losing the Force had changed them both. He wasn't sure what to make of the man in front of him now.

"Did Astraal come through for you?" Shado asked.

"She did. Thank you."

The Jedi didn't budge. "Do you know how long you'll stay here?"

"No. I'm sorry." After a pause Ganner added, "Azlyn is all right, if that's what you're worried about. She's safe, far from Coruscant." He hoped it was true, anyway.

Shado didn't seem assuaged. "You're moving against Chalk, aren't you?"

Ganner went very still. He didn't answer.

The Twi'lek shrugged. "If you do, think long and hard about what might happen. Think about the consequences. Then think about the ones you *haven't* thought about."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You'll keep it in mind. But you'll go through with it anyway, won't you?" Shado seemed sullen and lost, pessimistic and resentful. Ganner wondered what could have happened to the Jedi to make him like this.

"I know what I'm doing is right," Ganner said. He had to believe that. Noble purpose was the only strength he had left.

"Do you think the Force is telling you that?" Shado's voice was soft, his tone bitter.

Because he had to know, Ganner said, "Master Vao... What *happened* to you?"

The Twi'lek finally tuned his eyes down. He breathed deep and said, "I was on Bakura."

"I'm sorry." Ganner had seen holos of the world's ruin.

"You don't understand. I was there from the beginning. I should have stopped it. I thought I *was* stopping it..." He swallowed. "I thought the Force was guiding me. But it was only vanity."

"I'm sorry," Ganner repeated. He still didn't understand and wasn't sure he wanted to. "When we get the Force back, you'll hear it clearly again. We all will."

Shado kept his head low for a long time. When he finally picked it up, he asked, "Do you really think that?"

Ganner had to believe that too. "There's hope," he said. "Cade Skywalker found Khat Lah."

"Really?" The lids on Shado's eyes narrowed, like he was trying to contain the hope inside.

"Yes. I don't know more than that."

"We haven't heard anything from Master Lowbacca..."

Ganner cursed himself for spreading secrets too far. "I don't know the specifics. I only know what I've heard."

"You trust your source?"

Ganner nodded. He barely knew her, but he did.

Shado's expression was still conflicted. He was a man so deep in despair he distrusted his own hope. He did, however, push off from the wall and say, "Thank you, Ganner."

Ganner nodded. The Twi'lek walked past him without a word and receded down the hall. Ganner watched him go, still wondering what had happened to Shado, still hoping he'd never find out.

## Chapter Twelve

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When Cade passed through the gate between worlds, the transition came with a warm tingling through his body and a flare of white that swallowed his vision. The tingling faded before the white, and for a minute Cade simply stood on the other side of the gate and waited before the new world faded to existence around him.

He breathed the alien air and felt it on his skin. It was cool without being cold and dry in his lungs. When his vision cleared he saw why. Before him was a vast plain of dusty earth and bare rock, spread out in low undulating hills. He saw no plants at all, no running water, no signs of life. Desolation stretched on for miles and miles. It could have been the surface of an airless moon.

That was strange; stranger was what he saw when he lifted his head. They truly were at the heart of the galaxy. He'd never seen a sky so densely packed with stars. Most of them were old and deep on the color spectrum, and red and orange lights seemed as plentiful in the sky as night-black. With this many stars, he thought, there *was* no night, only an unsettling perpetual twilight. Cade rotated his body to look in all directions and noted several points of bright light on the horizon. Some were stronger, some dimmer, but unlike the broad corona a lit-up city projected into the sky, these looked like luminous spears climbing into the air, maybe hundreds or thousands of meters, before fading into starlight.

The landscape was strange, the sky stranger. Strangest of all was how this place felt in the Force. Back on Lehon, the

ancient Rakata homeworld, he'd felt oppressed by an invisible dark miasma left behind by that dead conquering race. He felt similar remnants here but they weren't dark exactly. What he felt, rather, was the promise of raw power. He stretched out with the Force but couldn't grasp it or see it clearly. It lurked on the edges, like those strange light-pillars on the horizon, hinting but not revealing greater things.

Cade was a long time taking in this strange place. Eventually he turned attention to his companions.

All four of them still stood before the hypergate. The high stony structure looked like a perfect match for the one on Rohakalla. Now that they'd passed through, all light had vanished from the portal and it seemed just an empty arch. Looking through it, Cade saw more of the same: lifeless landscape, star-packed sky, strange lights in the distance.

Finally he turned attention to his companions. Eli was restless. He looked in all directions, eyes narrowed, trying to make sense of what he saw. Kyra was different. She emanated a sense of wonder and, Cade thought, a nagging fear of the unknown. Finally, there was Khat Lah. The Yuuzhan Vong stood farthest from the others, slightly on the downward slope of the hill on which the hypergate was perched. He watched the three newcomers with a calm, patient expression. He'd probably seen something like this before.

"Okay," Cade said, "What now?"

"We have days of travel ahead of us. I suggest we start walking."

Cade looked back at the teenagers. "You two okay?"

Kyra jerked at the sound of his voice but said, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Yes," Eli agreed, though his eyes were still on the distant landscape. "The Force... I can't feel it."

"It will awaken in you," said Khat Lah, "But it will take time."

"How much time?"

"You will know when it happens, and it will happen. Be patient, Eli Horn."

Eli shifted the pack on his back. "Yes. I can be patient." He looked uncertain, lost, and definitely not like a dangerous

Sith apprentice. Cade had to remind himself what the kid was capable of.

Without another word, Khat Lah started down the slope. Cade followed, with Kyra and Eli coming silently behind him. The hillside was all hard rock, but when they reached more level ground the earth became lined with a pale gray dust. Cade could see some of it had been packed hard, apparently by passing feet.

"You give many people this tour?" Cade asked Khat Lah.

"No one you haven't already met on Rohakalla."

Looking down, he could even make out some individual footprints. It occurred to him that he felt no breeze on this world; no wind at all. The air was stagnant, which meant there'd be little erosion. He looked at the star-packed sky again and couldn't see any clouds.

"Where are we going that it's gonna take us days to reach?" he asked.

Khat Lah raised a hand at one pillar of light glowing on the far horizon. "There."

"And what is *that*?" asked Kyra.

"There are places here that are incredibly rich with Force power. It breaks through the planetary crust and rises to the stars, like heat from a volcano."

That sounded extremely dangerous to Cade. "You've been there, I take it?"

"Yes. I've travelled all over this planet, seeking the eruptions."

That explained some of the gray in his hair, the lines on his face. He said time travelled faster here, which meant he must have spent many local years charting this world.

"And when you came over here, did you do it alone?" Cade asked. "Or did you bring your Yuuzhan Vong buddies?"

"When I first crossed over, I explored alone."

"What about the Kwa?" Eli asked.

"They helped me open the gate, and several came through, but they did not go far. They felt this place was dangerous." After a pause he added, "They were right."

"Great," muttered Kyra. "Dangerous how. It looks... totally dead."

"You will learn. In time."

Cade was hoping that once they got over here the vague cryptic answers would stop. He wasn't the only one frustrated; Kyra released a labored sigh and shifted the pack on her shoulders.

"You know," Cade said, "if this is such a long trip, we could have taken the repulsor-sled from *Mynock*. Or one of the speeder bikes from his ship." He jabbed a thumb at Eli.

"Mechanical devices do not function if taken through the gate," said Khat Lah. "Only living beings may pass intact."

Well, that was interesting. Cade had heard about ancient pre-Republic technology that was powered by the Force itself, but he'd never considered seriously how such creations might operate. It implied what Maladi had said during her long dying rant, that the Force used to be much stronger than it was now, more connected with the everyday life of every being.

"Then does that mean this thing is useless?" He slapped the lightsaber at his waist.

"I do not know. A Jedi's weapon is simple, and in its fashion draws from the Force."

Because he had to know, Cade took his lightsaber in one hand and thumbed the trigger. The green blade shot out; its hiss and hum seemed like a roar on the soundless plain.

"Well," he muttered after shutting down the blade, "That's something, anyway."

As they walked on Eli said, "This is a strange planet." His voice was soft with curiosity.

"You think?" Cade said.

"I see no plants. No animals. How can there be oxygen without any plants?"

"There is life here," Khat Lah said. "It blossoms around the eruptions and sustains the rest of the planet."

"How?"

"The Force is strong there, so strong life flourishes out of bare rock. You will see. Be patient."

"I am patient," Eli muttered, and they kept walking.

They passed over more low ridges. The expansive stone landscape passed slowly by. The faint packed-dirt trail led them down a gradual slope, and from a distance they could make out angular structures that stood in contrast to the



surrounding natural curves. As they drew closer still, Cade realized they were nearing the ruins of a city. Chunks of walls, crumbling on either edge, rose ten or twenty meters high. Fragments of a few arches jutted above their heads.

"So people used to live there," Eli muttered. "You said this planet... attained consciousness. Like Zonama Sekot."

"There are cities on Zonama Sekot as well," Khat Lah reminded. "The Force is all life. The beings who lived on this world were part of the matrix that formed its consciousness."

"But you said the consciousness got... subsumed into the Force. That it left behind all physical form. Does that mean all the people- all the sentient beings- who lived on this planet... ascended? Whether they wanted to or not?"

"What they wanted, I cannot say. But all life on this world was transformed, probably in an instant. We'll see more evidence on that to come."

"Do you have any idea when this happened?" asked Kyra. "The Kwa have their Journal of the Whills. They say it goes back twenty-five thousand years."

"What happened here happened longer ago than that. We will discuss more later. Let us keep walking."

They walked. Cade was generally not a guy who got creeped out easily, but things started to get to him as they passed through cyclopean ruins jutting out of an ancient desert. This planet felt wrong in the Force, fundamentally different than anything he'd ever known. It was ancient, but everything here felt half-formed, malleable, raw. He suspected that feeling would only get strong as they approached the eruption in the distance.

The Force didn't change as the planet turned to face its sun, but the dry plain was cast in a new and sickly pallor. The star that rose in the sky was red and dying. It was large overhead but the light was dim, more like the reflected glow of a moon. As star like that, he thought, might be around ten billion years old. How wondered the age of the rock he stood on how, and how long ago its total consciousness has dissolved into the Force. Perhaps it took millions of years of continuous life for a planet to evolve collective awareness. If so, planets like this one would be concentrated in the Deep

Core, where billions of years of gradual draw from the galactic center's black hole had collected the most ancient stars.

Khat Lah had said this world had ascended a long time ago. Cade had a feeling he wasn't kidding.

Even trying to think about this beggared imagination. The Rakata and their Infinite Empire had perished, what, twenty thousand years ago? The mythic Celestials, who'd apparently once been their masters, had disappeared maybe ten or twenty thousand years before that. This place was more ancient by magnitudes, as old as the galaxy, as old as the Force.

Cade was no longer disturbed by this place. He was starting to get afraid.

They took periodic breaks for food and water, dropping their packs and sitting down in the middle of the plain. It felt strange, having an entire planet to themselves. Through the Force, Cade felt that Eli was curious and wary. Kyra was impatient. Khat Lah was watching them all closely, Eli especially. The stoic-seeming Yuuzhan Vong had a clear emotional investment in the kid; Cade hoped it didn't come back to bite them.

The red sun climbed high quickly; the planet must have had a quick rotation time. As it began its downward slouch, Khat Lah led them into a canyon pass. The rock seemed cut straight through, as though by giant vibro-blade instead of a river. Cade had led the kind of life that made him wary of narrow passes and high walls from which an ambush could spring, and even though he knew he'd find nothing, he reached out with the Force for other lifesigns. Not even animals here.

When this planet's living conscious had been absorbed into the Force, every living thing had been sucked up with it, and Cade had a hard time believing they all wanted to be part of an immaterial energy field. Then he wondered whether the living consciousness on Zonama Sekot was just a young and teething form of whatever this planet had evolved to after millions of years.

More terrifying thoughts. Cade was so distracted by them he didn't notice they were approaching the canyon's end.

When the sight became clear it took his breath away. The land sloped suddenly downward, and as he panned his head from side to side, he realized he was standing at the brink of a crater at least dozen kilometers in diameter. On the other side he could see more craters pocking the far distance.

"It's like a meteor storm hit this place," Kyra muttered behind him.

Khat Lah said nothing. Cade sensed he was waiting for them to understand. He dropped his pack off his back, took out his macrobinoculars, and began scanning the craters. They were deep and perfect pits, the kind you saw on airless moons that had racked up impacts over the eons and didn't have the atmosphere to erode them. This planet *did* have an atmosphere, and occasionally Cade had even picked up a faint breeze. He looked at the crater edges and his stomach went cold. They were half-crumbled to dust but still visible: slumping walls and fragmented arches, like they'd seen in the ruined city before. He realized now that the city they'd passed had been a mere village, and the entire vast plain ahead of them had once been covered by a sprawling metropolis.

"Those weren't meteors," Cade said. "This place was bombed. It was a *war*."

Grimly, Khat Lah nodded.

The others took it in in silence. Even a massive baradium bomb or a turbolaser volley from high orbit couldn't have carved craters this deep. Maybe someone had precision-dropped asteroids on the city. Maybe they were using ancient weapons, more powerful than anything around today.

*Stang*, he thought. Maybe somebody back then had built their own Death Star.

"I thought you said this planet *ascended*," Kyra said, voice slightly trembling.

"Come," Khat Lah said gruffly. "Walk with me. We will camp at nightfall and then I will explain."

They began the process of crossing the plain, skirting around the edges of the craters. It was a long walk, silent with foreboding as the three humans tried to process what they were travelling through. The old red sun, which had climbed the sky quickly, now lingered over the far horizon.

Cade grew tired before it dropped out of sight. The disturbing sights and heavy packs were wearing them all down. When the sun disappeared the world only seemed to grow a small bit dimmer, as the Deep Core's stars still glowed overhead. He was glad to be done with the blood-red pallor, if nothing else.

They hadn't entirely exited the crater-pocked ruins when night fell. Cade didn't look forward to sleeping in an eons-old graveyard, but he had even less desire to keep trekking. Khat Lah understood that, and with the sure guidance of someone who'd made this pilgrimage before, he led them to a bald crest of land wedged between two craters.

"This is a high place," he told them as they lay down their packs and got out materials for a fire. "It is easy to keep watch from."

"What exactly do we have to be on the lookout for?" Eli asked.

Khat Lah didn't answer. Kyra pressed, "Do we *need* to keep watch for something?"

"Not tonight," he said.

Nobody tried to get more out of him. Instead Eli took out a flare-stick from his pack and twisted the ends in opposite directions to spark the fire. He tossed it on the stone top of the hill and they watched flame consume the stick. It wouldn't burn high but it would burn long, warm them against chill, and heat up some of the canned food they'd brought.

It still wasn't much of a meal. Once they'd seated themselves by the fire and started digging into their tins, Kyra reminded Khat Lah, "You were going to explain what this place is."

"Indeed." The Yuuzhan Vong exhaled and looked into the fire. "You understand that I do not know everything. What happened here touched the very nature of the Force, and minds like ours cannot comprehend them. Only the Whills can do that."

"You say this planet ascended," Cade said. "That it voluntarily shed its flesh- which means all the life-forms on it- to become one with the Force. And that makes it a Whill."

"That is correct. As far as words can say."

"How did you learn all this?" asked Eli. "Was it at that... eruption we're heading toward?"

"I gained... understanding there. Much of what I'm about to tell you is recorded in the Journal of the Whills, but the events took place eons before the Kwa civilization existed. It is myth and legend, but with enough truth left in it. This galaxy is billions of years old. Galactic civilization, as you know it, has only lasted how long? Twenty thousand years? Thirty? Does that not seem strange to you?"

"Honestly," said Kyra, "Trying to image thirty thousand years is enough to fry my brain."

Cade laughed softly, but Eli said, "This planet and its star have to be ancient. But when did this... ascension take place? You keep saying this was eons ago, but what does that mean? Can you give us a number?"

"No. I cannot," Khat Lah said. "My point is this. There are depths. The Force springs from life. It is as old as life and goes back deeper than any of us can know. The Kwa believe that there were empires that spanned this galaxy *millions* of years ago, centered on worlds like this. Yet traces of them have vanished. Dissolved into the Force, or ascended."

"What does this have to do with those Celestials?" asked Kyra.

"Celestials are a name for what we do not understand. According to the Kwa they once served masters who used the Force in ways we can't conceive and eventually joined with it to become Whills. They dominated this galaxy for many millennia and shaped entire star clusters." Khat Lah took a breath. "The Kwa think even they had precursors. Time goes back deeper and deeper. Layers of beings beyond our understanding strode stars like giants. Worlds like this attained collective consciousness, transcended their physical forms, and were subsumed in the Force."

"Worlds," Cade repeated. "So they're more like this out there?"

"The Kwa are certain of that. You know of Mortis."

His mouth felt dry. "Yeah."

"The Kwa believe Mortis was such a one, and there were others. The living worlds had ascended millions of years ago but their Force power was so strong that echoes remained,

like electric pulses twitching through a long-dead body.” He pointed to distant pillar of light. “According to the Journal of the Whills, the Celestials sought to harvest that power. They captured those worlds and put them inside great eight-sided monoliths, like that around Mortis.”

“What about the Ones that Anakin Skywalker met? The Father, Son, and Daughter?”

“The what?” Kyra tilted her head.

Cade sighed. “I’m just passing down hearsay, but supposedly, way back during the Clone Wars, Anakin Skywalker ended up inside Mortis. He met three beings there with *grancha* crazy powers who were supposed to maintain balance in the Force. The son was dark, the daughter was light. The father was supposed to keep balance, but he died ‘cause Anakin wouldn’t take his over throne. Not that I blame him. I always thought it sounded like a metaphor, not anything close to real, but...” He looked at the lifeless landscape, the dense bright stars. “Stang, what does seem real nowadays?”

Khat Lah said, “The Kwa suggest the Father, Son, and Daughter were Celestials who decided to remain in the physical realm, directing events as they saw fit.”

“Until they and Mortis all went dead.”

Khat Lah nodded.

“So basically,” Kyra sighed, “This place is older than old?”

The Yuuzhan Vong nearly smiled. “Basically.”

“What about the hypergate? How did it even get on this world?”

“It was built by the Gree. I know that much for sure. When they served the Celestials they ranged across the entire galaxy. Somehow they even navigated the dense packing of stars to find this old world near the heart of the galaxy. They built one gate here and linked it to the one on Rohakalla, which was then inside their empire. The Journal suggests this became a place of worship for them. To pass through the gate and come here was an act of religious pilgrimage.”

Cade looked at the pillar of light faint in the distance. Some things, apparently, never changed.

“When we first came here,” Eli said, “You told us that here was where the old gods kept. What did you mean by that?”

Khat Lah looked at the light-pillar too. "You'll discover when we get closer."

Cade was finally starting to understand. Khat Lah wasn't answering questions because he couldn't. After all the years he'd spent here there was a lot he still didn't understand and probably never would. He'd brought Cade here in hopes his Skywalker blood could unlock more secrets. That was plain to understand, but he still didn't get what Eli and Kyra were here for, especially Kyra.

The girl was trying to puzzle it out herself. She said, "You've talked about these Whills, how they give up their bodies and merge with the Force. What then? I mean, you have this name for them. That makes it sounds like they've got some identity still and didn't just, I don't know, disappear."

"A wise question." Khat Lah looked to Cade. "I'm sure your father told you about the Living Force."

Cade's mind flashed back ten years. The last, awful day on Ossus. His father standing before the swarm of approaching Sith, shouting, *I am Kol Skywalker, servant of the Living Force! None of you will pass!*

Mouth very dry, he said, "Yeah. Dad said the Living Force was this moving thing. Every living being, big or small, was a part of it. Life created it. Made it grow. And when we die a little part of it joins that current."

"It joins, but does not dissolve."

And he remembered his father's Force ghost appearing before him, gifting him with strength and wisdom when he needed it most. Kol's body was gone but his will remained.

"That's right," Cade rasped.

"The Kwa believe that a powerful enough presence can turn the flow of the Living Force, especially if they pool themselves together. They suggest that mortal Sith succeeded in doing it, and your ancestor Anakin Skywalker was created was consequence."

"I'm familiar with the theory." Maladi's ranting against went through his mind.

"Imagine a being powerful enough to willingly transcend mortal flesh and join with the Force permanently. One like that could certainly direct the flow."

“Especially if it’s the size of a damn planet,” Kyra said.

Khat Lah nodded. “Quite so. You understand that when I spoke of old gods, I was not speaking entirely in metaphor.”

Cade shook his head. “Dad talked about the Living Force too, but he also said there was a core to it, something nobody could control.”

“I believe that is also truth. From a certain point of view.”

Cade sighed. “I hate that kind.”

“I first heard this theory from your grandmother. There is more than one nature to the Force. Jedi and Sith believe there is a light side and dark side, but Jade Skywalker told me of another division that may be truer. She told me there is a Living Force, into which all life feeds and sometimes molds. There is also a Cosmic Force, from which the Living draws strength but cannot touch. As she described it, the Cosmic Force is the wellspring and the Living Force is the river.”

“Well. I can’t speak to that one way or another... but Grandma was a smart lady.”

“Perhaps she was wiser than any of us know.” Khat Lah looked back at the light-pillar. “But that is something we will have to discover... in time.”

It was a lot to process, and there was little talking after they finished the meal. They brought out bedrolls and spread them across the stony hilltop. Kyra asked Khat Lah if someone needed to keep watch. In another non-answer, he told them not to worry and rest as well as they could tonight.

Neither Eli nor Kyra was totally happy with that, but they were too tired and confused to argue. They laid down on their rolls, bodies turned away from each other, and didn’t stir.

Cade lay down to do the same. He closed his eyes for a few minutes and opened them. Khat Lah was sitting on the hillside, looking out at the vast crater. Cade closed his eyes, opened them again. The Yuuzhan Vong was still sitting there, clear in bright starlight.

As quietly as he could, Cade slid out of his bedroll, walked over to the Yuuzhan Vong, and sat down.

“You look like a guy who’s keeping watch,” Cade whispered.

“Merely thinking.”



Cade tried to read the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force, but got only the dim sensations of someone purposely stifling his aura. Khat Lah picked up some tricks along the way.

"You talk how it's dangerous here. I still don't understand why we didn't take Jao or Lowie. They're strong and powerful."

"That is precisely why I did not want them."

"Oh." Cade thought a moment. "So I'm *not* strong and powerful?" Vain as it was, it kind of hurt.

"You are a special case, Cade Skywalker. For now, I am not worried about you. Their awakening will come soon."

"Awakening. You mean getting the Force back." Cade eyes their blanket-wrapped forms and wondered if they were really sleeping. "So how does that work?"

"I cannot speak to it. Like you, I did not need awakening."

Cade eyed him in the dark. He started to think this stoic-seeming Yuuzhan Vong was playing with him. "Got any hints?"

Khat Lah looked up at the stars. "Among my people, especially those who follow our old gods, pain is seen as the bridge that binds us to something greater." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It seems they were right."

"Well. You'll forgive me if that's not exactly what I wanted to hear."

"It is not your pain we should be concerned with now. It will come for them soon, maybe even tonight. How they react to it will determine much."

"So we're watching out for them?"

"They may need our help... and our guidance, in days to come."

Cade nodded. He didn't understand, but he knew what he had to do, and he wanted to get some sleep where he could. He looked at the sky and the ancient war-racked landscape, surreal in bright starlight. Then he went over to his bedroll and slid himself inside. As he lay down he thought he heard Eli stir, but when he watched the young man's back he was still.

Cade tried to forget about it. He lay on his back, closed his eyes, and tried to sleep now, while he still could.

## Chapter Thirteen

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Ganner Krieg spent a day and a half in the Jedi Temple before Treis Sinde's response finally came in the form of a single datacard, delivered without explanation by Astraal Vao. By the time he returned to Eastport, everyone had been recalled to *Starlight Champion* and gathered in the crew lounge to hear what he'd discovered.

Ganner hadn't checked the datacard yet and was as in the dark as any of them. He felt like he had a small army over his shoulder as he plugged the card into the datareader and viewed its contents. They came with no explanation from Sinde, but most of the information was easy to understand. He found selected records from Galactic City's flight control system, which marked two separate occasions when an IC-2 scoutship descended from orbit and appeared to land directly at a service hangar attached to the Department of Transportation headquarters building.

"That's where they're keeping the empress?" Hondo Karr grunted disbelief. "I was expecting the main palace complex, maybe the justice or defense buildings... But the transit department?"

"It's not where someone would think to look," Sauk said. "Maybe that's the point."

Ganner considered. "I know that building. It's one of the few places in the government district that didn't get wrecked in the fighting. While we were rebuilding, we had to cram in a lot of other agencies until they had their own spaces. Mostly they got stuck in the lower levels."

“So when they move into their own buildings, there’s vacant space for Chalk to remodel,” Tes said thoughtfully. “It makes sense.”

“It’s still a huge tower. I think there’s over a hundred storeys still in use.”

“The empress would probably be below that,” Marin said. “Far below. What else is on the card?”

Ganner checked the other files. A half-dozen personnel reports listed biographical data on six different stormtroopers. All had served with valor during the war against Krayt and all had experience in intelligence work and black ops. From the markings Ganner could tell these were classified profiles, which meant Sinde was doing some risky sleuthing.

“So who are they?” asked Yangar. “Did Sinde find the pilots who flew to Myrkr?”

“I’m not sure.” Ganner scanned through several profiles. “All of these records go up to about a month ago. Then they were all switched to Hogrum Chalk’s personal bodyguard team.”

“Does that mean he has them doing Myrkr runs on the side?”

“I’m not sure,” Ganner admitted, and wished Sinde had passed more explanation along.

“These may just be the people who are closest to Chalk,” Marin said. “I’d bet there’s a half-dozen people, at most, who know what he’s doing to Marasiah. Hells, the ones tending the ysalamiri might not even know why they’re doing it.”

“He had four soldiers when he arrested her,” Ganner recalled. “At least that many have to know.”

“Unless he shut ‘em up already,” Hondo muttered.

It was certainly possible; Ganner had no idea what was out of bounds for Chalk, if anything. Whatever cage Marasiah was locked in could easily be tended by droids. He looked checked the datacard for anything else useful and found a single, tiny text file. It read simply: *Men to watch. Let me know next step.*

“I think,” he said, “Sinde just gave us information on Chalk’s bodyguards. Which means if we’re watching them, we can watch Chalk.”

"You mean put a tracer on 'em?" Hondo sounded skeptical. "Even if we could get close enough, Chalk's gotta have top-grade security. They'll be sure to scan for homing devices."

"Some are easier to spot than others," Sauk said thoughtfully. "Others are nearly impossible to find, even with a good scanner."

"Do you have something specific in mind?" asked Marin.

"Maybe." The Mon Cal's big eyes seemed to stare back in time. "About a year ago we- Ania and our friends- used an old tracking device to find a pirate's treasure den. It's totally dormant except for when it sends a signal at once-an-hour intervals. The signal's practically invisible unless you've got a receiver set to hear the exact right frequency."

"Sounds useful if you're after something that doesn't move around a lot," Tes said. "But Chalk probably *will* be moving."

"It was an idea." Sauk spread his webbed hands. "I examined the thing before we put it to work. If I had the right materials I could probably build a new one."

"How big would it be?" asked Marin.

"About as big as a human thumbnail."

"Sounds easy to conceal," Hondo admitted. "I still don't know how you expect to get close enough to Chalk's guard to tag 'em though."

"I imagine Sinde would be in the best position to do that," said Tes, "If he's willing."

"There's only one way to find out," said Ganner. "But we need to do other things first. Sauk, are you sure you can fix up that kind of tracker?"

"I just need the materials. I'm sure I can find them on Coruscant somewhere."

"Then it sounds like you need to go on a shopping trip this afternoon," said Marin. "We also need to find out more about this transit department HQ. If the empress really is in the lower levels, we'll need some kind of building plan before we try to get there."

Ganner thought a moment. "Parts of that building are open to the public. They have to through security, of course."

"Good thing we brought a fistful of fake IDs," Oren said cheerily.

"You'll need more than that to actually get a copy of the building plans. You'd have to slice into a public information terminal without alerting security."

"Sounds like a fun challenge."

"It won't be fun if you get caught," Ganner warned. "In fact, it could scrub the whole mission."

"Oren's as good a slicer as we've got," his sister said. "I'll shadow him when he goes in and watch his back, just in case."

"Even if we do pull a building schematic, you can be sure it's not gonna have some EMPRESS HERE marker on it," Hondo said. "How are we gonna find her?"

"Well, the tracker might help," said Sauk. "If Chalk or his guards ever make a run to the transit building..." His eyes drifted toward Marin.

The old woman nodded. "I'll be able to sense if he enters the ysalamiri bubble."

"Handy powers, those are," Oren muttered.

"Are you sure you can do that?" Ganner asked cautiously.

Marin nodded again. "I've been taking time to meditate over the past few days. I've gotten better at pinpointing a single life amidst all this noise, though I admit I could use more time to practice."

"It'll probably take a few days at least to make the tracker and get it to Sinde," Sauk said. "From there... who knows when Chalk or his guards will go visit Marasiah."

"Not to crash your plan, but it might be *if* instead of *when*," said Yangar. "Can't we get, I dunno, old building plans of the transit headquarters?" He looked to Ganner. "You said it's been remodeled. If we can do a before/after comparison we can narrow down where the empress might be."

"That's good," Ganner nodded. "Oren, if you can get into the building computer, try to copy any map in the memory files, outdated and current."

"I'll see what I can do. You recommend a time to stop by?"

"Midday is probably the busiest time for visitors. If you want to get lost in a crowd, go then."

"Understood."

Silence filled the hold. Hondo gave a wide look around and asked, "Is that it? Do we have a plan?"

"It seems like we do." Ganner sounded slightly surprised.

"What about the offworld part of this job?" asked Yangar. He was referring, of course, to Ania and Azlyn, who'd gone back to the Alliance fleet to beg assistance.

"Nothing yet," Marin said. "If and when they have something to say, they'll contact us."

Right now Ganner didn't even know what help the Alliance could provide; they'd have to locate Marasiah before coming up with a rescue plan. They might not even require assistance at all. Nonetheless, he knew Azlyn's mission was important. If and when they rescued Marasiah they'd have to get her off Coruscant and someplace safe before she announced her survival to the galaxy. If she came riding into view on the bridge of the *Alliance*, thereby cementing the collation that made the Galactic Federation possible, well, it seemed to him the best possible outcome.

But that was a long way off, he reminded himself. Both he and Azlyn had a lot of work to do.

Ania lost count of how many jumps it took to reach their destination and so did Azlyn, but Anj gave them a warning shortly before they exited hyperspace for the last time. All three women crowded *Scarlet Star's* cockpit as the old YT-2100 freighter shuddered out of lightspeed and plunged into the Alliance fleet.

As they slipped between two sabertoothed Mon Cal cruisers and vectored for the broad white wedge of the flagship, Ania could tell she was surrounded by a formidable fighting force. She also knew that it was no match for the combined navies of the Galactic Federation, all under Hogrum Chalk's command. This fleet was a flint match, big enough to set off an inferno but not enough to win a war.

It was a precarious position they were in, and Ania thought she saw some of that tension on Anj's face as the woman guided them into the secondary hangar beneath *Alliance's* bow. There wasn't much of a welcoming party, just a few soldiers and a short-haired human who introduced herself as the ship's captain.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Ona Antilles said, without pleasure. "If you follow me, I'll take you to the admiral."

It was a long ride from the nose of the ship to the command section, and as the lift car whisked them along Anj asked, "Anything fresh from Coruscant?"

"Nothing yet," Antilles shook her head. "You're not our only new arrival, though. Senator Derrol is aboard."

Anj raised both brows. "Good to hear it. How'd he find us?"

"He used to serve on *Alliance* and still has friends here. He and his wife arrived a few days ago."

Ania had been faintly impressed to hear Derrol was on the run with his wife. She doubted most political spouses had that kind of loyalty.

She was even more impressed when Antilles led them into a conference room behind the bridge. Admiral Bey was here, a big and intimidating Weequay. Both Derrols were present as well. Ania didn't know much about Chagrian aging but the wife looked barely out of her teens. Her husband wasn't much older.

Anj gave the senator a firm handshake. "Good to see you survived. I got worried for a while."

"I'd be a poor soldier if I let some Imps take me down now when I'm needed here." He released her hand and gave more polite shakes to Ania and Azlyn. "Captain Solo. Master Rae. It's an honor to have you aboard."

"It's an honor to be had," Azlyn said, and nodded to Bey. "Thank you, Admiral."

The Weequay nodded back. He seemed relieved to have a politician around to handle niceties. "I appreciate your willingness to travel this far. Now I'd like to know why."

Everyone took a seat before they launched into explanations. Azlyn talked about how she and Ganner had seen the empress being arrested shortly before the explosion and described their escape. Ania told them about the mission to Coruscant and the leads they were following.

Admiral Bey watched it all with a stiff leathery face, and Antilles looked just as skeptical, but Ania noted sparks of hope and maybe enthusiasm from the two Chagrians.

Bey saw it too and said in level tones, "We appreciate what you've done and what you're trying to do. However, I don't see what support you need from the Alliance."

"We won't know until we get a detailed report from Ganner," said Azlyn. "But right now, all we have is a small team of Mandalorians backing Ganner up. We may need more firepower." Ania silently thanked her for leaving her mother out of this.

"There's no certainty the empress is even on Coruscant," said Antilles. "*Or* that she's alive."

"She's alive. We saw her," Azlyn said firmly. "And we know Chalk has been importing some ysalamiri, and the plants they need for food. He's setting her up for a long-term captivity."

The admiral sighed, "I want to believe you, but the evidence is circumstantial at best. I've never heard of these... ysalamiri creatures."

"Imperial Knights and Jedi don't like to advertise their existence, for obvious reasons."

Almost timidly, Saara Derrol raised a hand. "I've heard of the creatures before. They do exist." Everyone except her husband shot her a surprised look. She added, "I had an interest in Jedi history once. I studied them before the war."

"Even so," Antilles said, "We still need more."

"And our friends are getting more," said Ania. "We came here to sound you out and see what kind of help you'll be willing to provide."

"I'm not going to commit anything now," said Bey. "I can't, not with so many unknowns to deal with."

"We understand," said Azlyn. "But we'll get more information in coming days. We'd at least like to know up front whether you'd be willing to shelter the empress once we free her."

Ania had been hoping for an immediate yes on that, at least. Instead Bey said, "You understand we're in a precarious position. Admiral Stazi and two of our senators are going to go on trial for murdering the empress."

"And if you can show her in the flesh, that'll tank Chalk's murder case," Ania said.

"Yes, but what then? How Chalk would react?"

"His government would be over. His admirals would never go along with a guy who usurped the rightful empress."

"They did once, with Krayt," Saara reminded.



"Chalk's no Sith Lord," said Azlyn. "He's just a man, and he can't make them bow like one. And I'm sure the senate wouldn't stand for it."

Bey sighed. "If the empress is alive, and if you rescue her, it will shake Chalk's government so hard it will either collapse, or he'll dissolve the senate and purge all his enemies, violetnyl. He may even execute Stazi without trial. I can't be party to that."

"Whoa, hold on," Ania said, "Marasiah did every damn thing she could to hold the Federation together. She wanted to make it work for Imperials and Alliance both, right?"

"Yes," Bey admitted.

"And now you're just going to leave her hanging because it *might* jeopardize your guy?" Ania stopped herself before she called him a coward.

"Admiral Stazi kept us, and the Alliance, alive for a decade," Derrol said. "You can't expect us to have the same loyalty to Fel as we do to him."

"We're not asking for that," said Azlyn. "But if we *are* going to get rid of Chalk, we're not going to do it by fighting old Imperial-Alliance squabbles, right? Stazi knew that. It's why he made a pact with Roan Fel."

The looks shared by the Alliance people were satisfyingly guilty. Bey said, "If the empress can be rescued and needs shelter... I believe we can help."

"Thank you," Azlyn exhaled.

"We'll consider other options as they present themselves." Bey lifted a hand toward the door. "We've prepared amenities where you can rest until then. Captain Antilles, please show them where they can rest."

The captain stood and started for the door. Ania and Azlyn followed, sharing glances as they passed out of the room. It wasn't the start they'd been hoping for, the looks agreed, but for now it would have to do.

The door sealed shut behind them, and Anj finally felt free to ask the question that had been on her tongue for the past two minutes.

"Jhoram, are we *really* just going to leave them hanging in the wind?"

The Derrols looked taken aback by her bluntness, but the admiral smiled. “We’re not leaving them hanging. If they can rescue the empress, we’ll give her shelter. I just promised that.”

“It’s a start,” the pilot said, “But is that *it*?” She wanted to tell him he used to be braver as fighter jock and would have if the Derrols weren’t watching.

Bey got the message anyway. “I have to make every choice carefully, Anj. The fate of this ship, this fleet, maybe even the Federation depends on it.”

“Okay, I get that,” Anj calmed herself. “But she’s right, you know. If we don’t give help, and they fail to rescue the empress because of it, what does that make us? We can’t afford to give up on a potential ally, even if there is a risk.”

The senator exhaled heavily. “I’d accept an alliance with Fel to take Chalk down, but Stazi, Nelloran, and Kaige could die even if they free her. Except for a bit of luck, I’d be with them too.”

His wife put a hand over his. “I know you feel a debt to your friends, but there are more important things than them. Saving the empress might be the best chance to save the Alliance.”

Derrol looked at her with surprise, which wilted quickly. “You may be right. It’s ironic though.”

“Too much for my tastes,” Bey said. “For now we wait. In the coming days... we’ll make our choice.”

And then, thought Anj, our choice will make us. One way or another.

## Chapter Fourteen

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Jariah Syn didn't consider himself to have a long list of virtues, and patience wasn't on it. As soon as Cade and his companions passed through the gate and disappeared, he started getting anxious for their return. They said time passed differently on the other side of the gate, that it moved faster somehow, which skewed Jariah's expectations the wrong way from the start. Hours went by and they didn't come back through. Night turned to day and back to night, and they still hadn't come back.

He wasn't the only restless one. Deliah tried to distract herself with busy work on *Mynock*. She'd enlisted Lowbacca, and when Jariah found them they'd climbed out on the staship's red wing to remove the tracking device placed there. After their standoff with Eli Horn on Tython, they and the Sith apprentice had placed trackers on each other's ships to ensure that neither tried to run out on their awkward partnership; now that the Sith kid was in parts unknown, it seemed like a good time to remove his handiwork.

Jariah crawled out of *Mynock*'s open hatch and stepped across the broad wing toward Deliah and Lowbacca. He watched as the Zeltron's cutting-torch sheared through the tracker's magnetic clamps and the Wookiee pulled the thing free with a mighty tug.

"Glad to have that off," Jariah called.

"You and me both." Deliah shut off her torch and rose to her feet.

"You want to work on the other one?"

He jabbed a thumb toward the Sith's scout craft, parked next to *Mynock* just past the canyon rim.

Lowbacca gave a roar, and Deliah agreed, "Yeah, best to keep it on. Never know if that *cheeka* will make a run for it."

"She doesn't look like she's going anywhere. First she finds out her buddies are all dead, then her boy leaves her behind." Jariah gave a snarling smile. "Poor *schutta* looks like some kid who lost her favorite toy. Almost feel bad for her. Almost."

Lowbacca responded with gruff warning. Never drop your guard around a Sith, especially one who still had two lightsabers.

"Yeah, that's a point," Jariah admitted. Stepping to the edge of the wing he looked down, past the canyon rim, at the gate below and the torchlights scattered around it. Some Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa were still gathered at the arch, as though keeping vigil. Talon was nowhere to be seen and probably sulking in her cave. Jao Assam and the droids were likewise absent.

"Is Threepio still doing translation work?" he asked.

"Best I know," said Deliah. "I think the Imp's with him."

"Studying ancient lore, no doubt." He looked at Lowbacca. "How come you're not down there, being all scholarly?"

The Wookiee explained in a series of woofs and barks that he preferred to keep his mind busy in different ways. He'd always been a tinkerer, more interested in machines than ancient history.

"You're a Wook after my own heart," said Deliah, "But what all those old scrolls might have something that'll get the Force back. Don't you care about that?"

Lowbacca huffed. Of course he cared. When the gate had lit bright he'd barely restrained the urge to leap through it, but he was also dealing with power far behind the ability of a mortal Jedi to understand. If anyone could come close it was probably Cade, so for now he'd resigned himself to wait until Skywalker's return.

Jariah still wasn't comfortable thinking of his friend as a cosmic keystone, and neither was Deliah. The Zeltron muttered, "We'll just see what they come up with. Hope it won't be too long."

Lowbacca roared a question. Deliah and Jariah exchanged glances, and the Zeltron shook her head. “We *could* make another run out of the system and get some updates... but I’d rather not. I wanna be here when that gate lights up and Cade comes back.”

Lowbacca woofed. Their devotion to their friend was admirable.

Jariah wasn’t used to compliments from a Jedi. He’d once hated Jedi passionately for killing his dad, but he told himself he’d gotten over that and accepted that his pa hadn’t been the hero he’d remembered.

“Well,” he grunted, “Cade’s the *koochoo* who dragged us into this. Someone’s gotta watch out for him.”

Something moved down below, and Jariah leaned over *Mynock*’s wing for a better look. In flickering torchlight he spotted the Sith *cheeka* herself walking slowly across the canyon floor toward the gate. A pair of Yuuzhan Vong warders stayed exactly three meters behind her, and a few more stepped closer.

But Darth Talon didn’t do anything. She just stopped in front of the arch, stood there, and stared at it. After a minute she sat down in a cross-legged pose, like she was meditating, and continued to watch the gate.

Gradually the Yuuzhan Vong around her relaxed. Jariah looked away too. Even her kind was groping for answers. It should have been a comfort, because it meant she was less dangerous, but instead it was a reminder that whatever was happening on the other side of the gate, it was far, far beyond what Jariah could wrap his head around.

Not that he wanted to. He was a man who lived his own life and had no desire to be tugged around by old gods or a shapeless cosmic will. It would be a bad day for the galaxy if any of those mystic powers ever met a barve like him. Whatever was going on there, it was something he was better off not understanding.

Still, Jariah hoped there was someone out there, on some plane of existence, who could.

One moment she was asleep, buried beneath bed-covers that were warm and soft. She stirred at the sound of thunder,

distant and dull against the sharp patter of rain against the bedroom window. Then the thunder sounded louder, and over the thunder was the rattling of objects on the bedstand inches from her head. Then, finally, came a roar overhead, only barely muffled by walls and ceiling, as something tore the air apart.

That was when she realized it was not a dream. She rolled onto her stomach, pushed hands against mattress and shoved herself up. She twisted and threw bedsheets off her, off her husband. He still lay asleep, his back facing her. Thunder sounded again, closer, and the building tremored.

“Jacov,” she said, shaking his shoulder, “Jacov, get up!”

He shuddered, opened his eyes, rolled to face her but didn’t rise. “What? What’s going on?”

Thunder again. She rolled completely out of bed, raced bare feet across carpet to the window. She threw open the curtain to show the cityscape outside. Lights moved through the night sky, exhaust-flares from overhead spacecraft. Fires were scattered incandescence across the city and smoke was invisible against billowed clouds. War had come to their home at last.

It was the realization of her most awful fears. For a second horror froze her; then she spun to her husband, still sleep-stiff and struggling out of bed. “We need to get to the basement,” she snapped. “We need to get Kyra!”

*(And that was when Kyra started to understand. This was a dream but more vivid than life; every sight and smell and sound seemed crystalized, perfected.)*

Jacov fell out of bed and barely landed on two feet. She was already past him, pushing through the door and sprinting down the short corridor to her daughter’s bedroom. Her loose nightgown flailed around her as she pushed through and half-fell onto Kyra’s bed. The girl was fast asleep but her mother’s shove woke her up. Kyra jerked half-upright and met her mother’s terrified face with a blank stare.

*(I look so small, Kyra thought.)*

“Kyra, come on, you have to get up,” she said, and wrestled the five-year-old girl out of the bed.

“What’s happening?” Kyra whined, confused. “What’s wrong?”

"Marla!" a voice called from behind, "Do you have her?"

"I have her," she said, and steered Kyra by the shoulders out the door.

"What's happening?" the little girl repeated. She twisted her shoulders and stared up at her mother with big dark eyes. They pleaded for explanation and compelled total protection.

*(It should be impossible to see through the eyes of the dead.)*

"I've got jackets!" Jacov called from the hall. She pushed Kyra ahead. In the dim overhead light they could see him at the far end, hoisting an armful of long coats.

"Where are we *going*?" Kyra asked, hoping for a concrete answer.

"We're going down to the basement," said Jacov. They gathered at the door and threw on light jackets to protect them from the cool and rain.

"But *why*?" the girl whined as her mother pulled arms through sleeves.

Over Kyra's head, she exchanged glances with her husband. There was no way to explain to Kyra that the city was being bombed and the war between the Empire and Alliance- a war neither of them had a stake in or even understood has finally reached them.

*(It should be impossible to feel what my mother felt.)*

"Something's happening, a really bad storm," Jacov said. Thunder pounded through the walls. "We'll be safer underground. Let's go."

He took Kyra's hand, opened the door, and pulled her through. All three of them stepped onto the exterior walkways that tier the outside of the apartment block. Wind and cold rain lashed their faces and pattered their coats. Jacov led the way toward the lift shaft at the far end of the building. They kept Kyra pressed against them as they hurried, terrified anything might happen to her, even here.

*(Still dreaming and twisting in her coiled bedspread, Kyra realized that anything is possible with the Force.)*

A howling sound filled the air as they got close to the lift shaft. As Jacov stabbed the button to summon the car, she dared look skyward. The sky was still dark, but she could see three starfighters flying low. They unleashed chains of

green laser blasts that lanced down into the city, disappeared for a moment inside the night-dark cityscape, then became gouts of flame that tore up streets and collapsed buildings.

*(Small thrust-flares, close together, tinted red. TIE fighters, Kyra thought. She'd never known for sure until now.)*

The lift- which has been shuddering up the tube toward their floor- suddenly stopped. She gasped as lights began to go out across the city. The plague of total darkness spread fast and she realized they must have knocked out a power control station. She looked back down the walkway and saw all the lights inside the apartment tower have gone out.

"Dammit!" Jacov swore and punched the lift control panel. "We'll have to take the stairs! Come on, hurry!"

This time Kyra didn't protest and didn't question. She was too scared to do anything except run with her parents halfway back down the walkway until they reached the stairwell entrance. Eleven storeys down to the basement. Steps were tricky for a five-year-old girl with short legs.

*(I never knew what was going on, Kyra remembered. She recalled that much at least from that horrible night. The stairs kept coming and coming fast and she was terrified her rain-slick shoes would slip and she'd fall into an unstoppable dive. Emergency lights in the stairwell were so dim, and it was nearly impossible to see each step. She didn't remember how tight her parents had held both hands, or how much they'd slowed their own descent to help her.)*

They'd only got down a flight or two before the stairwell became suddenly crammed with people, all of them trying to clamber down to the same basement. Suddenly they found themselves lagging behind a pair of old, stout Jeodu; they took up nearly the whole width of the stairs and were causing a bottleneck of frightened, desperate people behind them.

Holding tight to Kyra's hand, looking back all the time, she saw the terror and urgency in the people piling behind them and became afraid it might start a panic, a stampede.

Jacov saw it too. He let go of Kyra's hand, fell a step behind them, and gave her shoulder a soft shove. "Get her through. I'll catch up."

She gave her husband a short nod, then slid her body sideways and barely slipped past the plodding old Jeodu. She



tugged Kyra through the gap; the girl stumbled on the slick step and fell into her mother's breast.

*(Kyra remembered that too. Soft and warm and comforting, the last touch of her mother she ever knew. And now that she knew the moment was coming she yearned to break away. She wanted the dream, the nightmare, the vision, whatever this was to end, to end now, before it became too horrible to bear. Before she was forced to live her mother's death.)*

She lifted her daughter up, held her close with both hands, and carried her down the slight of clear steps. There was still a crowd filling the stairwell ahead but at least the crowd was plodding ahead slowly but surely to the safety of the basement shelter. Still clutching Kyra tight, she allowed herself a moment of relief that they might get through this night alive.

That was when the world broke in two. The entire stairwell rattled, slamming her and Kyra into one wall and sending others off their feet. Suddenly rain pounded down on them and she looked in confusion and shock and disbelief. A cloud of dust fell on her upturned face; she took one arm off her coughing child to brush her own face clear, and when vision returned she saw night-black clouds underlilt by a burning city, starfighters howling horribly overhead. The stairwell climbed up one full flight, then disappeared. Above that, walls crumbled and smoke furled from the burning wreckage of the metal stairs themselves.

*(The dream just wouldn't stop.)*

She couldn't see her husband. No one was coming up behind her, not even the old Jeodu couple, but through the darkness and smoke she couldn't be sure.

Indecision tore her, stealing time she couldn't afford. She looked back down the stairs and saw the crowd surging forward, more intent than ever to escape into the basement shelter. She carried Kyra to the next landing, bent low, and set the child down.

She stared into her child's eyes, stroked her soot-darkened face, and said, "Go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

"Where's Daddy?" Kyra asked.

*(The sound of her own voice made Kyra want to cry.)*

“Daddy’s fine, I’m going to get him now.” She tried to sound brave for her daughter. “Go ahead, I’ll be right behind you.”

“But Mommy-”

“Go,” she said, and gently pushed her daughter down the first stair. Kyra stumbled two steps more, into the back of a younger Jeodu, who didn’t seem to notice the human girl clinging to the back of his robe.

She took one last look at her daughter, then turned and charged back up the stairs to find her husband.

*(And now Kyra twisted in her bedsheets, sweating in the cool air, silently screaming for her mother to stop and turn around and go back to her daughter. Everything could have been different if she had. Everything could have been better. Just a few steps the other way.)*

She bounded up the stairs, three at a time. She plunged into choking, blinding smoke and tried to bat it away with her hands. She stumbled and fell and caught herself on a metal stair-plank. She glanced back to see what she’d tripped over and saw the body of one of the old Jeodu, awkwardly slanted across the stairwell. She couldn’t be sure from the haze, but it looked like green blood was gushing from a wound in his conical head.

She panted her husband’s name while crawling further up the stair on all fours. In her panic she barely noticed the growing howl of another TIE fighter.

*(The vision wouldn’t change. Screaming and sobbing in her nightmare Kyra begged the Force to end the vision and let her wake. She begged it for mercy.)*

She climbed up and up and suddenly she was at the place where stairs turned to twisted flash-melted metal. Her hands found the metal before her eyes and the heat burned her palms instantly black. Pain was overwhelming. She tried to scream out but when she sucked in for air all she got was choking smoke.

*(The Force was not merciful.)*

The TIE’s howl was so loud it erased nearly everything. She heard the lasers a half-second before they hit. The concussive force of the explosion slammed her in the back before she knew what was happening, and then she was in

the air, arcing through it. She was thrown out of the stairwell, over the crumbling walls, and onto the slanted wreckage of an outer walkway. She landed on one shoulder hard enough to crack it, and the ribs beneath her twisted arm shattered. More pain, agonizing. Her body, too limp and broken to stand, rolled helplessly down the walkway before stopping.

She lay face-up. She tried to move her legs but something was broken. When she twisted her hips white pain shot up her spine. Something warm trickled out of her mouth and down the side of her face. It had to be blood. That was when she realized she was dying and could do nothing about it.

Nothing except stare into the rain and the black storm-clouds.

*(Kyra felt her mother's death. She felt the agony of burnt hands and broken bones as just as if it had consumed her own body. Even worse than the physical pain was the knowledge that her husband was dead. Maybe her daughter was too, and if she'd survive Kyra would be without her parents or anyone else to care for her, an orphan helpless against a galaxy gone mad.)*

Kyra's mother took a long time to die, and the vision held Kyra to the end. She felt the encroaching cold and darkness, and she felt the steady resignation that took her mother in her final moments. All the love, all the striving, all the sadness and joys of life had all been for nothing. She hated it but there was nothing she could do. The world grew colder and darker. Eventually- though not soon enough- even the pain went away.

By the time oblivion took her, the rain had stopped.

And then the Force released Kyra. The vision was gone but the pain was not, and she lay in her twisted bedrolls, curled into a fetal position, and trembled. Her mother's dying pains echoed through her nerves, as vivid as they'd been in the dream.

She felt someone crouched over her, Skywalker or Khat Lah, and she felt a hand caress her face. It seemed like someone was trying to use the Force to calm her and relieve the pain, and very gradually the echoes began to dim. She thought someone whispered soothing words, but she couldn't make them out.

Kyra lay there for hours until the memory of her mother's dying agony finally faded from her body. It was like a second death.

The Sekotan flyer wrenched violently as its dovin basals struggled to swallow the latest round of laser blasts streaking through black space. The enemy had boxed them in on all sides like a pack of ravenous akk dogs. There was no escape now; the angry Duros militia was determined to make someone pay for the ruin of their world, and a shipful of Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong were the ideal victims.

In a way, he thought, they might deserve it for what they'd done. The Ossus Project promised paradise and had delivered hell. He still didn't understand how or why, but it was a disaster the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong both would have to pay for.

In a rush of despair he felt they deserved to pay for it. Then he remembered his son Eli in the ship's hold, and the resolve to live returned to him.

It returned, as well, to Khat Lah. The young warrior standing beside him lurched forward and stroked the communications villip mounted on the pilot's organic console. The surface of the black orb rippled to take the form of a flat, scowling Duro face. This was Ren Burr, the militia captain he'd tried to negotiate with a minute ago.

"I am Khat Lah, warrior of the Yuuzhan Vong and architect of our actions on your world." It was a lie; Khat Lah was just a bodyguard for the shapers, nothing more. If anyone should take responsibility for this mess it was he-Reikar Horn, Jedi Knight- but Khat Lah proclaimed, "I will leave this ship and surrender myself to you if you let the others go."

He opened his mouth to tell Khat Lah not to be stupid but the Yuuzhan Vong held up a hand and asked Ren Burr, "Will you let them pass? You will have to destroy this ship otherwise. I offer myself as a sacrifice."

The captain's face twisted in indecision before he said, "Only when we have you in our possession."

"As long as you let them go, I will surrender peacefully. If you do not-" Khat Lah growled, bearing teeth, "I will not."

He shut off the connection and handed the villip to the flyer's cop-pilot, who said, "Warrior, you honor us with your sacrifice."

"Go with the gods." Khat Lah snapped a salute, forearms crossed, wrists against shoulders. His companions returned it. Then he turned and hurried out of the cockpit.

He immediately followed Khat Lah. The flyer's main hold was packed with people, many of them wounded by the monstrous plants and animals that had sprung up on Duro like a nightmare made manifest. The Yuuzhan Vong was making straight for the dorsal airlock, taking long-legged steps over prone bodies, paying them no heed as he marched to his death. His companion followed after him, slowing just a second to look at this son. Eli was strapped into an impact couch affixed to the far wall. His five-year-old's feet dangled over the edge and above the floor, making him seem even smaller than he already was.

*(And Eli remembered this. His last image of his father is emblazed in his memory even after so many years. He remembered Khat Lah charging forward, determined toward some end he- Eli- did not then understand. And he remembered the way his father slowed, just a little, when his eye's locked with his son's.)*

And as he looked at Eli he understood, truly, what had to be done. To protect his son and all these people aboard, he had to be a Jedi. He had to atone. He had to save lives and he'd failed to save them on Ossus. And in that instant he knew what he had to do. He could save all of them, even Khat Lah.

*(And his father turned away, and Eli's heard broke. He knew what was coming next, and he knew that this dream, nightmare, impossibly vivid Force-vision, wouldn't release him until it was through.)*

It was just a short turn from the hold to short hallway that ended in the airlock. As soon as they stepped toward it he said, "You can't do this, Khat Lah. I won't let you."

"There is nothing you can do for us, *Jeedai*. Do not worry. I am prepared for my fate." The young warrior looked proud and strong and fearless, like always, but he had the tremor of repressed fear in his voice.

"There are other ways out of this." Try to reason with him, even though it probably won't work.

"No, there are not," Khat Lah said.

The airlock and pressurization chamber was one of the few non-organic parts of the ship. Khat Lah tapped the metal control panel to open the metal door. He immediately opened the supply closet where the vacuum suits were kept.

Give him the offer, once last time. "You *don't* have to do this," he said from behind.

Khat Lah turned and looked the Jedi in the eye. "Among my sect, we revere no one more than the *Jeedai* Ganner, who stood bravely against thousands of Yuuzhan Vong and fought until they killed him, all so his *Jeedai* friend could escape. There is no higher act than sacrifice."

"It doesn't have to be yours."

"We both know it does, *Jeedai*."

He lowered his head, as though accepting defeat, then took a step back toward the chamber exit. Khat Lah relaxed and turned attention back to his vac suit.

*(Don't do it, Eli screamed silently in his nightmare, but he could not stop his father's resolve.)*

That was when he moved, locking one arm around Khat Lah and throwing the big warrior off-balance. Khat Lah dropped the suit and raised both arms to defend. He released the Yuuzan Vong, jump-stepped back, and raised one foot for a strong kick that sent the warrior stumbling out of the airlock vestibule and back into the corridor.

Before Khat Lah could spin around, he slammed the controls and locked the chamber door. With a snap of the fingers and a touch of the Force he turned the door's control panel to a shower of sparks.

"*Jeedai!*" Khat Lah pounded on the door's porthole window. "What are you doing?"

"Tell the pilots to run as soon as I'm off the ship." He raised his voice to be heard through the thick metal. "I don't *think* they'll kill me... So watch over Eli until I return. And if I don't... Tell him I did what I could."

"*Jeedai* Horn!"

Khat Lah pounded on the door, but that was all he could do. On the other side, he stuffed legs and arms into the vacuum

suit and zipped himself tight. He grabbed the helmet, turned back to Khat Lah, and gave him a brave smile. "We all have to do our part, my friend, and this is mine."

*(It shouldn't be your part, Eli thought.)*

The look on the Yuuzhan Vong's face was heartbreaking. He turned from it, sealed his helmet and suit, and faced the heavy airlock doors. He checked his suit over one last time, then used the Force to wrench open the airlock's seal. Air rushed out and he rushed with it. He was swept out among the stars and the hungry Duros militia ships all gathering close. One was already on the flyer's flank and swooped in to grab him.

The ship was so close, and they'd pull him in soon. Instead of facing it he used the Force to tilt his body in the other direction, to face the Sekotan flyer. He felt a tractor grab him, reel him in. As he was drawn from the flyer it wrenched hard to port, rolled out between two Duros ships ahead, then nimbly dodged a volley of laserfire before breaking into a fast, clear shot for the edge of the gravity well. Laserfire still whipped past their ship as a few Duros gave pursuit.

*(Eli remembered the wrench of inertia and the burst of panic, and he remembered wondering where his father had gone to, never imaging that he was already as good as dead.)*

He felt light, free, triumphant. He didn't know what horrible sin he'd committed on Duro to doom that planet, but he felt absolved of even that.

He was a Jedi Knight. He saved those who couldn't save themselves, most importantly young Eli. With that conviction, he turned his body to face the airlock as it swallowed him whole.

His bravery faltered when rough hands grabbed him and pulled him through the vestibule. After the chamber pressurized more bodies piled in. They emanated raw anger through the Force and a savage hunger for violence. They'd been hurt; they wanted to hurt back. He tried to use the Force to calm the angry crowd, as he'd done many times before, but their spite was like nothing he'd ever felt before.

They wrenched his helmet off so he could look with clear eyes on the dozen flat, angry Duros faces ringed around him. That was when he first felt mortal fear.

*(Eli trembled in his sleep. He'd felt everything thus far with perfect vividness. Now he would feel his father's every pain. He never found out exactly how his father had died, only that it had been ugly.)*

"You are no Yuuzhan Vong," the closest Duros snarled.

"I am Reikar Horn, Jedi Knight. I spoke with Captain Burr a minute ago." He raised his hands and sent calming influence through the Force.

"Burr told us we were getting a Vong," snapped another Duros.

"I am a Jedi. I oversaw the project on Duro. I can help you."

"That's what you said when all this started!"

The first Duros lunged, grabbed him by the collar of his vac suit, and through him against the wall. His head snapped back into the bulkhead; pain blossomed through his skull as the Duros pressed his face close and growled, "'We'll help you,' you karking Jedi said! You and your pet Vong! You said you'd save our world and you *ruined* it! We trusted you!"

Dazed, he said, "This was *not* the Jedi's fault—"

"Then why didn't you hand over the karking Vong?" another one shouted.

"The Yuuzhan Vong are innocent. They've done nothing wrong."

"Like hell!" A Duros came in swinging from the right side. He tried to block the blow but it slammed into his flank, just beneath the ribcage. The one holding his vac suit kept him from keeling over in pain.

*(Eli felt the pain as if it were his own. No one was there to hold him and his body curled up tight in his bedspread.)*

"You invited those monsters into our homes," that first Duros snarled, "We trusted them because we trusted *you*. You ruined us!"

"Wait, please—"

A third Duros snapped, "Don't tell us you can explain! We've had enough karking *explanations*!"

He opened his mouth but didn't speak. He couldn't explain. He didn't know what had happened at Duro. He didn't know if the same disaster was repeating on the hundred other worlds on which the Ossus Project was taking place. When he'd thrown Khat Lah aside and gone out the airlock, he hadn't



been thinking of any of those things. He'd only wanted to save his friends, and his son.

He said, "I-"

The first Duros punched him in the face. His head cracked against the bulkhead again. As he groaned the one on his right punched his stomach again.

"Please," he croaked, and summoned the Force to calm them or at least to try-

Another Duros lunged in on his left. He felt the closed fist hit first; then the cold of the vibro-knife as it slid through his vac suit and skin and into his stomach. Pain and bile surged through his chest. The Duros who'd been holding him up stepped away and he half-fell forward. He tried to summon the Force still, to clear his mind through his pain, but it wouldn't come. It wouldn't save him.

*(Eli cried cold tears as he dreamed. He'd give anything to change this fate, even just to escape it, but nothing comes. He prayed to the Force- to the Whills, to whatever old gods speak on this unreal world he was trapped in- that this dream can end.)*

Realize filled him with sadness, and then fear. Then another Duros came in from behind and stabbed another blade into his back and through his kidney. Pain exploded. He tried to scream but didn't have the breath. He pitched forward and collapsed on the deck.

*(The Force was not merciful.)*

They gathered around him. Like a pack of hungry akks they came in for the kill. Some delivered kicks, other bent low for punches. He tried to curl into a fetal position and protect his head and neck but they kept coming at him. Someone else came and stuck him with a vibroblade, and fresh blood gushed out to add to the red pool already spreading around him. It moved fast across the slick floor, and as they kicked and punched and beat him his face, now twisted in dying agony, became washed in blood.

Still they kept at it, beating and pounding him until the pain dulled. Vision dulled. Darkness claimed the fists and boots and falling knives and finally claimed everything, even regret that he'd never see his son again.

*(Numbness was a gift, Eli knew. Otherwise his father might have tried imagine- just for a moment- what it would be like for his son to be a child in a war-wracked galaxy without his father. Yet even if he had, he'd have never imaged what his son would become. That, too, was a mercy.)*

When the vision ended Eli could feel every punch and kick, even knife-thrust. He felt someone hold him down and pour calm into him with the Force. His eyes broke open and he saw them leaning low over him, a silhouette against bright starlight. The looming shape recalled the Duros who'd killed him- killed his father- and with a wordless shove he tried to push them away. The figure staggered back, struck by an invisible blow, then bent close again, pinned Eli to the ground, and poured the Force into him.

His father's remembered pain retreated slowly. His vision cleared and Eli realized it was Khat Lah bent over him, doing whatever he could to heal the son of the man who'd died in his place.

And he realized how, just a moment ago, he'd shoved Khat Lah away.

"It... I...." His jaw chattered. He opened it wide, took deep breaths, and allowed Khat Lah to calm his shaking body before he spoke again. "I... did it... the Force...."

"It has returned to you," the Yuuzhan Vong said in a sad voice. He looked over his shoulder; Eli could dimly made out the form of a long-haired young woman, Kyra, standing along at the edge of the hill, looking out on the alien landscape, lost in her own awakening.

Khat Lah stroked his forehead tenderly, brushing hair from his sweat-damp face, and said, "Among my people it is said that every great gift must be paid for with pain. I hope, for your sakes, this is your last and only payment."

## Chapter Fifteen

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As he sat down in Hogrum Chalk's office, facing the regent across a desktop and two cups of morning caf, Treis Sinde was extremely grateful the Force had been silenced. Which, he supposed, was proof of how absurd his life had become.

He'd never thought of himself as a man adept at subterfuge, but the past week proved him to be a fast learner. When he'd passed the datacard containing traffic data and profiles of Chalk's bodyguards, he hadn't known what would come next. When Astraal had returned several days later, the sealed box she'd brought from the Jedi Temple contained a scrap of flimsy with instructions wrapped around a pair of metal chips the size of his fingernail. One for him, Ganner had written. One for the regent or his guard.

For the next day he'd prevaricated, wondering whether it was worth the risk or if he should have Astraal make yet another courier run and return the tracking device. He'd politely asked the Twi'lek to keep these runs private- that is, not to tell Chalk- and she'd agreed, though the question in her eyes bordered on suspicion. Even sending her on one more run would be a risk.

That was why, heart pounding in his chest, Treis had found pretense to make small talk to one of the guards standing outside Chalk's office just a minute ago. For a second he'd laid a hand on the man's shoulder and gently affixed the adhesive side of the tracking chip on the interior edge of the shoulder-plate, where it would be invisible except to thorough checks.

The chip would be found eventually, probably through armor maintenance, but for now Ganner's people had a window, probably of a few days. He prayed it got them what they needed.

It wasn't guilt that wracked Treis as he sat down with Hogrum and casually sipped his caf. He increasingly suspected that somewhat was, indeed, happening in the lower levels of the Department of Transit building, and if Marasiah was hidden there, he had every right and duty to find her out. What unsettled him was pure nerves; subterfuge was not his specialty but Chalk's, and he was afraid the regent might spot some mistake he hadn't known he'd made.

Hogrum, however, seemed slightly weary as he sipped caf through scarred lips. He placed the cup on his desktop and said, "I'd like to meet with Master Dare to discuss security arrangements for the trial. Sometime late this afternoon, if possible."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Treis replied. He kept one hand tight around his cup to keep from shaking. "Do you have a clear idea of what we'll need to prepare?"

Hogrum nodded. "The Jedi's recusal has clarified things somewhat. And I believe we finally have a timetable. I'm looking to begin the trial ten standard days from now."

Ten days. That was less than a month since the bombing, a stunningly fast time to put together a criminal case. Unless, Treis thought, you manufactured most of the evidence.

"What about Senator Derrol?" he asked.

"You tell me," Hogrum said wearily. "Has Master Val made any progress?"

"No," Treis admitted.

"Neither have my agents."

"Still, putting Derrol in trial in absentia... it won't appear credible."

"Derrol lost credibility himself when he ran."

"You don't want to wait until we have him?"

"I would, in theory, but I have to be practical. We may never have Derroll. Our best chance of catching him was when we tried to arrest him with the others. Since then our odds of capture diminish by the hour. For all we know he could be hiding in Chiss space right now."

"That seems... unlikely."

"I don't mean literally. I meant he's run and probably found a secure place to hide. The galaxy is vast and full of holes a ranat can cower in. If he picks a deep one he can stay there without having to run and risk capture. If we wait until we find him, we could wait a decade. No. We have to move forward and administer justice soon."

"And you're sure you have an airtight case?"

"Yes. Even the terrorist enablers in the Senate will have to accept it."

Treis was impressed by his conviction, and also frightened. "You must have uncovered impressive evidence."

"We have. You'll see it in time. Have faith, Master Sinde. We'll make sure justice is done."

Hogrum took a long drink from his cup. Treis forced himself to do the same, then asked, "When will you make an official announcement?"

"This afternoon, fifteen hundred hours. I'd like to meet with Master Dare after that."

"I'll be sure to arrange it."

"Thank you, Master Sinde." Hogrum pivoted his chair slightly to let his natural eye wander toward the skyline. "The Imperial Knights will have a heavy presence at the trial. You should reserve at least sixty percent of your people to keep the justice center secure."

That was a large order. "Does that include our agents abroad?"

"No. Let Master Val chase Derroll... He might even get lucky."

"I understand. Is there anything else?"

Hogrum seemed to consider; then he shook his head. "That's all for now."

"Very good, sir." Treis rose finished his drink, placed his cup on the desk, and rose. "Thank you for the drink."

Hogrum nodded absently. "My recommendation to you is to make sure you get good rest the next few nights, Master Sinde. No matter the outcome, next week is going to be very... stressful."

He didn't know the half of it. Treis bowed, stepped out the door, and with effort refrained from glancing at the guard

outside on whom he'd stuck the transmitter. He retreated from the regent's office with long fast strides and was pretty sure he kept his hands from shaking.

They knew something was finally happening when the two tracking beacons they'd sent to Treis Sinde began transmitting from different locations. The first pings arrived at the exact same time from the different devices, but according to the transceiver Sauk had fixed up, those devices were now some eight hundred meters apart.

They still had precious little information to work with, but they had to get a closer look. They'd obtained a cheap airspeeder the previous day, and it had taken Sauk some six hours to successfully patch his transceiver into the speeder's navigational system. It was gross violation of the rental contract but necessary for what they had to do next.

Once it was confirmed that the trackers were separate, Marin, Sauk, and Hondo piled into the speeder and took to the air. The airspace around the government district was heavily patrolled but technically open to the public, so with Hondo behind the wheel, they took their speeder on a series of convoluted loops around the different government buildings and did absolutely nothing to attract attention from security patrols.

Exactly thirty minutes after the first distanced pings, they received two more. Hondo had made sure they were flying close to the palace complex, and when the signals came, they were mapped onto the speeder's telemetry data to give an idea of what exactly the signals were coming from.

Hunched in the speeder's back seat, peering at the portable viewscreen in his lap, Sauk reported, "Both signals came in clear again. It looks like one's coming from the Imperial Knight wing, the other from around the executive tower."

"Well, at least we know which is Chalk and which is Sinde." Hondo glanced at Marin. "Any chance you can feel the regent?"

"Do a slow loop around the palace," she told him.

"Sure thing." He twisted the wheel. "After one round I'm bugging out. Don't wanna attract attention from security. We'll come back in a half hour for another fly-by."

"I know," Marin said, and closed her eyes.

Over the past week she'd gradually acclimatized herself to Coruscant and its chaotic Force aura. She'd practiced by standing amidst crowds, picking random pedestrians with her eyes, then identifying them in the Force and using that signature alone to follow them. It required immense self-control, but in theory it should be easier sitting in a speeder instead of wandering through a crowd.

She kept her eyes shut tight, breathed in and out slowly. Time seemed to slow as well. She found two Force-auras right beside her: Sauk curious and deliberate, Hondo always edging for action. She felt them, marked them, and ignored them. Then she stretched further.

The government complex was full of activity. Thousands of beings milled through its halls and offices, performing the complex duties of state. She felt a collective tension underlying the mundanity of bureaucratic work, the same kind of tension she felt all over Coruscant: everyone was waiting for the next bomb to go off. Literal or metaphorical nobody was sure, but everyone expected something big.

Amidst such a mass of minds, it was hard to find those that stood out. She was sure Chalk's would; she'd only met the man once or twice, and that was forty years ago, but there was a mental weight people gained when in positions of power. She'd had it herself when leading the campaign against Yaga Auchs, and she searched for the same weary severity among all the beings in the palace.

One stood out against all the others, more wear and more severe. She concentrated on it to the exclusion of all else and felt her chest grow tight with conviction. She angled her head to face where the feeling emanated from, and when she opened her eyes she found herself looking straight at the stout executive tower that peaked the palace.

"I have him," she whispered. It came out so soft but Hondo heard, and he wrested the speeder away from the palace.

As they put distance between them and Chalk, Hondo asks, "You really got a bead on him?"

"Yes," she swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry suddenly. "I'm pretty sure."

“Good. We’ll wing around in-” he glanced at the dashboard chrono- “Twenty-six minutes and try again.”

Marin nodded and watched the government district move around them. Instead of heading straight out, Hondo made a turn and veered northwest.

“Figure we should check out the transit HQ while we’re in the neighborhood,” he said.

“Good idea,” Sauk chimed from the back seat.

The Department of Transportation building was a tower standing separate from the others. It rose high and plunged deep, and Hondo cut altitude to give them a better look at the lower levels as they flew by. Marin and Sauk both took out macrobinoculars and pressed against the speeder’s left-side windows. Marin spotted several angular ports in the skyscraper’s gently-curving face; she figured any one of those could have been service entrances ideal for dropping off secret shipments for secret prisoners. She noted that only one of them seemed to have external sensor cameras. That portal was on the southeast side of the tower, facing the drum-shaped judicial building two kilometers away.

They did a complete loop around the transit building before Hondo increased speed and altitude. As they skirted around the edges of the government district, she and Sauk discussed what they’d seen and agreed on the most likely port of entry. Hondo put them on a return course seemingly as fast as they’d left, and Sauk prepped his computer to receive the next pings from the trackers.

As for Marin, she closed her eyes, tried to ignore the passing towers and speeders, and found the memory of Hogrum Chalk’s Force-aura in her mind. It was already starting to fade to insubstantiality but she held it tight and readied herself to feel it again in a few minutes.

She only opened her eyes when Hondo said they were close to the palace. Squinting into the midday sun, Marin watched the great structure draw close. She reached out for Chalk, seeking him in that same tower, but as Hondo took them on the first loop around the building she found it empty of his presence.

“He’s not there,” she muttered.



"Hold on," Sauk said. "Ping's coming up in ten seconds... Make that five seconds..."

Marin closed her eyes, sealed off her senses, and searched again. She caught a whiff of him—weariness and severity—and tried to zero in. He wasn't in the executive tower, he was somewhere else, somewhere *closer*.

"Got him," Sauk said. "Telemetry says... he's in the air!"

"He's in a speeder," Marin said, and opened her eyes.

"Great," said Hondo. "Which one?"

Even in the security-patrolled airspace around the palace, there were dozens of ships to pick from. Marin didn't spot anything with a visible security escort. That threw her off, so much she nearly lost track of Chalk, and she forced herself to close her eyes and concentrate again.

Sauk provided what they needed. "Ping says he's north and west of the palace. Say, point-eight kilometers. Can't tell which direction he's going."

"He's going away from it," Marin whispered as knowledge came to her.

Hondo twisted the speeder and hit the accelerator. Marin felt the life-swarm of the palace recede behind them but Chalk was still ahead. He seemed to be getting neither closer nor more distant, but space was hard to measure in the Force.

Then she understood. "Wait," she said, "I know where he's going."

"You mean the transport center?" asked Hondo. "Just our *shabla* luck."

"Slow down," she warned, "We don't want him to know he's tailed."

"Got it," said Hondo.

Marin only opened her eyes when she'd felt they'd decelerated to a crawl. She opened them to find the transit department toward dead ahead. Hondo had plucked the binoculars from her laps and was holding them to his eyes even as his other hand gripped the control yoke.

"That's him all right," Hondo said. "An airspeeder just ducked into that landing bay."

"Southeast side?" asked Sauk.

"Yep. The one with the cameras, like you said."

"Now what?" The Mon Cal looked at Marin. So did Hondo.

She took a deep breath. They were close, damn close, but they weren't there yet. For all they knew, the regent was paying the Department of Transit bureaucrats a surprise inspection.

"Sauk," she asked, "If we get a ping from inside, can you overlay that data to the building plans Oren sliced for us?"

"I should be able to."

"Good. Hondo, fly us some nice easy loops around the building."

"Fly too many and we'll attract security," he said, but complied anyway.

"Just give it a few minutes. Then we can fly out and come back in time for the next ping."

"What are we waiting for?"

Marin didn't answer. She closed her eyes again and dipped into the Force. She pushed away Hondo's and Sauk's auras, sifted through all the thousands of workers in the office tower, and found Chalk's, faint but distinct. The speeder swung around that aura like a planet around a sun, and with every loop she felt herself knowing the aura better.

And then, suddenly, it winked out.

Marin's eyes opened. She felt for Chalk one more time, but he simply wasn't there.

"What is it?" asked Hondo. "Can we go now?"

"We can go now. I've lost Chalk."

And found Marasiah, she thought.

When her uncle stepped into the room Marasiah was in the middle of exercises, her only release of pent-up anger and frustration. The portal opened and Hogrum slid into the chamber, a pool of inky black against the white glow of the walls. She immediately sprung out of her push-up, palms jumping off the tile, snapped her back straight, and stared into his mismatched eyes from two meters away. Blood and adrenaline were pumping fast and she had an instant's desire to lunge for him.

Marasiah restrained herself. Still breathing heavily, she clenched fists at her side and said, "What do you want, uncle?"

"Only words."

"You came to ask my *advice*? I already told you, I'll never give it to you."

Ignoring her, he stepped over to one of the room's soft chairs and lowered himself into it. Marasiah glared down at him bit back the urge to tell him to leave. It would do no good. She stalked around and sat down in the chair opposite.

"I'm moving ahead with the trial," he told her. "Ten days from now, Stazi, Nelloran, and Kaige will be put on the docket for your murder, and the murder of your husband. Porat Derrol will be tried in absentia."

"What kind of trial?" She asked because she was curious.

"A criminal one. It will be heard by a panel of seven magistrates."

"I assume you've already guaranteed a guilty verdict."

"You assume too much. I'm not a tyrant, Sia."

She looked around her cage and laughed one bitter laugh.

"I'm not," he insisted. "The judges will make their decision of their own accord. Once they weigh the facts they'll decide they have no choice but to convict."

"Facts," she said bitterly. "Falsified evidence."

"Some will be, but I faked nothing I didn't already know."

She shook her head. "All you know is what Eshkar Niin told you before you murdered him."

"Which was the truth."

"How? Did you feel it in the Force, uncle? No. Of course you didn't. Niin was a *Sith*."

"I know that better than anyone. Even you," he said with a flash of anger, and aching memory of her mother.

"Even without the Force Sith are masters of deception. Niin would lie with his last breath to spite you."

"He tried." Hogrum's face darkened. "I took that breath from him."

This would get them nowhere. Marasiah leaned back in her chair and asked, "What did you come here for? Just to tell me the news?"

"I'd like to solicit your opinion."

"Ask."

"The magistrates will weigh the guilt of the parties accused, but I intend to have a hand in sentencing. What punishment would you suggest?"

She stared at him. "Are you seriously asking me?"

He nodded soberly.

"They're innocent beings. They shouldn't be punished at all."

He shook his head. "Let me rephrase the question. *If* senior Alliance officials colluded in your husband's murder, what punishment would you suggest?"

"They weren't. I'm certain of it."

"You're not," he said plainly, but it was a stinging accusation.

It was right, too. Just before Hogrum's coup, she'd sent Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae to question Senator Derrol. She'd never found out the results but all three had gone missing. She had no idea what it meant, but it had to mean something. Perhaps even that her uncle was right and she was wrong.

"*If* they had killed Antares... I would want them punished. Severely."

"Even if it strained the Federation?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"And what kind of punishment would you recommend? Capital?"

Her heart said *yes*, but her lips said, "No."

Hogrum's scarred forehead wrinkled. He didn't believe her. "What instead? Life in prison? That makes them rallying points for Alliance die-hards."

"Kill them and you make them martyrs."

"If I imprison them Alliance partisans may try to break them out. And if they escape—"

"They'll find no support, because you've painted them as criminals in the public eye and cowed the Alliance senators into admitting you were right. That *is* your plan, isn't it, uncle?"

He regarded her before nodding once.

"Here's another reason," she said. "By letting them live you prove yourself magnanimous in victory. It will be harder for your enemies to paint you as a pure villain. You run the risk of them getting freed, yes, but if you put them in a secure enough facility, you shouldn't have to worry about that."

A secure facility like this one, she thought. She still had no idea where she was being held, not that it would do her any good.

Marasiah was tempted to suggest that he brutally execute Stazi and the rest, and any other Alliance loyalist who gave him trouble, just in the hope it would spark an insurrection and topple him. She didn't do it, though, because her uncle would see through the ploy and because she didn't want the blood of yet another civil war on her hands.

Which meant Hogrum understood her well, and had been wise to seek her advice after all.

"I will consider your argument." He stood up. "I'll visit again before the trial."

"You don't need to bother yourself," she said, voice brittle. "I can keep myself busy here."

"Your well-being is important me, Sia."

She had the urge to strike him as he turned but remained in her seat. As he walked for the door she called, "If the Force ever returns, uncle, your lies will be exposed. And you'll pay for them."

He stopped before the portal and looked at her. "That's quite unlikely. The research into rejuvenating midi-chlorians has been going for a year now with little progress."

"They may still discover something."

"They may, but it's unlikely. I've begun to drain staff and funding from the project. Quietly, of course."

"What?" She rose from her seat. "Why? Don't you *want* the Force back?"

"The Force," he said, "is the *last* thing the galaxy needs."

"How can you say that? You're an Imperial Knight!"

"Yes, and I've seen better than anyone how the Force can cloud one's judgment. It ruined mine for many years, and it took me too long to break from its influence and do what needed to be done." His lips tightened in a scowl. "But the Force does far worse things than that. Eshkar Niin was an honorable Knight, one all of us trusted with our lives. Then his lust for mastery corrupted him and turned him into a beast."

"Men don't need the dark side to turn traitor."

“No. But the Force amplifies their desire and the damage it can do. The Force allows men to make themselves into monsters- and very rarely saints. Either becomes an agent of chaos. The galaxy needs *order*. It doesn’t need the Force.”

“You’re wrong. The Force is more than a corruptor. It gives wisdom and strength-”

“Does it, really, Sia?” He looked around her cage.

She felt hollow inside, as hollow as the words she’d said. She’d been raised from birth to believe the Force was as vital as breathing. The gifts it allowed were supposed to grant her the ability to realize any dream and surpass any obstacle.

She’d had the Force with her all along, carried in her Skywalker blood. It hadn’t done a thing to save her mother, her father, or her husband. It hadn’t kept her out of this prison.

“The Force is done with this galaxy,” Hogrum said. “I only hope this galaxy is done with the Force.”

She could have opened her mouth and reminded him that Cade Skywalker was out there, once again the Force’s unlikely last hope. Instead she kept it shut and watched him step outside of the chamber. Light eclipsed black and she was alone again.

## Chapter Sixteen

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Khat Lah had been right when he'd said time was different on the other side of the gate. Dilation was one thing- they'd learn the full truth of that when they returned to Rohakalla- but simply being on this world was strange. Day was only slightly brighter than night, and less welcome for the eerie, blood-colored glow of the dying sun. Cycles passed quickly but they never seemed to pass at the same rate; it was impossible for their bodies to gather and rhythm and they simply trekked until they were tired and lay down to sleep in the middle of the path, under bloody sun or myriad stars, it made no difference.

At least, they tried to sleep. Cade didn't know what dreams had afflicted Eli and Kyra. They refused to say. The dreams- or nightmares, or Force-visions- had come to them their second time sleeping in this place, and they'd both woken up violently trembling with remembered pain. Kyra had woken up first and Cade had rushed on her, ready to heal any way he could, only to discover the damage was to her mind, not her body. Khat Lah had done what he could to calm her with the Force and soothe the phantom pain away. When Eli had awoken hours later, he'd done the same.

The Force had returned to them both. Cade could feel them more clearly than ever. But as to what had awakened them, they wouldn't say. The two young people had become lost in the echoes of their dreams. Yet the march toward the distant pillar of light continued. They strung a long, loose

line, with Khat Lah and Cade in lead, Kyra and Eli trailing behind them and distant from each other.

As they trekked Cade kept pace with the Yuuzhan Vong and asked, "Was it like this with the others?"

"Yes." Khat Lah spoke softly, though Eli and Kyra were out of earshot. "Through the Force they were dropped into visions as vivid as life. My companions were also reluctant to speak about what had happened. From what they eventually told me, I gathered the Force took them all to a moment, perhaps *the* moment, that defined the person they'd become. For many that was a moment of pain."

"I gathered that." If this was true, it wasn't hard to guess what Eli's pivotal moment had been. He had an idea what Kyra's was too. "So it drudged up old memories. That's rough... But when they woke up they were hurting bad. Physically."

"I suspect the Force made them relive those moments... from a different perspective."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the Force knows *all* life." Khat Lah lowered his voice further. "One of my warriors told me- in strictest confidence- that as a youth, one of his creche-mates on Zonama Sekot joined a radical cult that worshipped Yun-Yammka and sought to bring back our warlike ways. He was forced to kill that friend. The Force made him relive that incident... though the eyes of the one he killed."

That explained a lot. Cade knew Eli's father had died in agony. He imagined Kyra's parent hadn't died well either. For just a second he tried to imagine feeling his own father's death, fatally stabbed by Darth Nihil's blade then burned from the inside by his dark lightning. Nobody deserved to experience that kind of death and live with the aftershocks.

"The Force isn't usually so... intrusive. Or cruel."

Khat Lah cast his eyes on the distant light. "The Force is different here."

He could say that again. The strange miasma seemed to grow gradually thicker as they approached the light. The power still felt raw, neither light nor dark. Its omnipresence and unknown quality made Cade feel claustrophobic, and he refrained from touching the Force except in the lightest ways.



He was afraid that if he used it here, he might not be able to control it.

Trying for optimism, Cade said, "Well, I'm glad we didn't have to go through *poodoo* like that."

"You understand what I meant when I was worried about them more than you."

"Yeah, I get that now." He glanced over his shoulder. Kyra lagged behind, and Eli lagged further, but they kept plodding. "Is this why you brought the Horn kid along? You thought his weird Force-vision would scare the Sith out of him?"

"It was my hope," Khat Lah admitted.

"Tough lessons."

"Yes."

They walked a little more in silence. A thought came to Cade. "You said the Force showed your guy his friend's death, through his eyes. That was before either of them could touch the Force."

"Clearly the Force still touched them, in ways none of us knew at the time."

"I guess so." Another thought came. "The Force awoke in your guys the same way it did in Eli and Kyra. You see the difference in them, right? They have midi-chlorians and your guys don't."

"In practical terms there *is* no difference. Darth Maladi's virus rendered their midi-chlorians inert. I imagine they still are. They are touching it directly, without intermediaries, the same way I am." Khat Lah tilted his head in thought. "The Jedi have always held that the Force embraces all life, even the kind that has passed through death into the Force. This planet demonstrates that tenant in full."

"Yeah, I get that now."

"No. You do not."

Cade shot him a glare. He'd hoped they were done with the cryptic evasions, but apparently they weren't. He resisted the urge to call Khat Lah on it. He knew it wouldn't do any good.

After a little more walking, the Yuuzhan Vong said, "One more thing about these visions. I believe Eli Horn is still having them."

Cade resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. "You sure?"

"He wakes suddenly from sleep, shuddering from pain. He uses the Force to soothe himself. Sometimes he even falls back asleep."

Cade felt ashamed for missing it. "What about Kyra?"

"She sleeps restlessly, but she doesn't seem to be haunted by dreams, at least not painful ones."

"So those are just Eli, then."

"Apparently, the Force is not done speaking to him."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing? You wanted him to get scared straight, right?"

"I did, and whatever happens, he will not go back through the gate the same being he was when he entered."

Cade had a feeling that held true for all of them. "That's not necessarily a good thing."

"I know. That is why we must watch them both closely."

He sighed. "I never wanted to be caretaker for some messed-up kids. I didn't exactly have the most stable upbringing myself, you know."

"I do. That is another reason why I wanted you to come with us through the gate. Besides the obvious."

He lifted his eyes toward the light-pillar, still far off. It was a nice reminder that the real challenges lay ahead of them, not behind. For now, Cade thought, keep an eye on the kids. He'd deal with the bright unknown when he got there.

He didn't understand what was happening. One moment he was hunched over his desk, processing the latest shipment reports his boss wanted. Then, suddenly, Qordis had stepped into the room. The paunched, bearded man looked down on his clerk and said, "I have to step out. If anyone comes, stall them."

He blinked eyes gone fuzzy from staring at the datapad. "What do you mean?"

"I mean keep them busy here, as long as you can." Just like that, Qordis spun on his heel and made for the office foyer. He got up from his desk and followed his boss. The man was throwing on a light jacket and stuffing datacards in a case.

"Can I ask where you're going?"

"I just have to be so someplace. They'll help you mind the fort."

Qordis snapped his fingers at a pair of very old YVH battle droids that stood like metal mannequins on the far wall by the window. He couldn't tell if his boss was joking; it was hard to tell a lot of things with Qordis, like why a civilian freight company had started shipping war materiel, or why he'd seen fit to keep two droids in his office for the past few weeks.

*(At the sight of those droids Eli knew exactly what this vision was and the kind of pain he'll feel this time.)*

He knew going in that Qordis' operations might not be entirely on the level. There were rumors. But he'd climbed aboard anyway because he needed a job after his last one, and there weren't many companies on Orannessen willing to hire a man at who'd been knocked out of manual labor by chronic back pains and had no special skills. His age was also a detriment: forty-six standard years and approaching fifty dreadfully fast. To his relief, nothing Qordis had made him do looked any way illegal. If he had that side to his business he was letting other people handle that.

Qordis shrugged on his coat, grabbed his case, and headed for the door. As it opened he called to his boss, "How long do you think you'll be gone for?"

"Several days, I imagine. When you're done with those reports, send the copies via HoloNet." That meant he was going offworld, to one of his company's other offices. It must have been something special, maybe something bad, that had drawn him away so fast.

Qordis slipped out the door. It shut behind him.

*(Eli realized that this time, he'd never even get the name of the man he was trapped inside. In his dreams the past few nights- or what counted as night in this strange place- he'd been shown the final minutes of other beings before he'd killed them. In his dreams he'd felt their pain and known their thoughts and understood the petty details of their lives. Last time he'd been one of Governor Salk's security guards on Vorzyd V, privately fretting about a gift for his girlfriend he wouldn't survive to give.)*

He sighed, turned around, and looked at the two battle droids. They were totally unmoving but the photoreceptors in their faces glowed faint yellow, indicating they were

operational. Combined with the skull-like faces it was an unnerving sight. He didn't even know if the battle droids could fight anymore; Qordis claimed they could, but he'd also had them decorating his office for weeks instead of shipping them to a buyer.

"Just you and me, boys," he muttered faintly. They didn't respond.

He sighed, went back to his desk, and tried to put his mind off of all of it. It was steady work with decent pay. He was lucky to have it. After his injury he'd been unemployed and despondent for months, gaining weight and drinking a lot more than he should have. Those empty days had forced him to take a look at his life, the decisions he'd made and not made, and it wasn't a pleasant picture. No wife or children, no career, no friends good for anything except rounds at the cantina. At that time, no job and no money.

At least he'd gotten the last two. It was something, he told himself. It filled the empty days and made it a little easier to ignore the dumb wreck he'd made of his life.

*(Just minutes left, Eli thought. Just minutes until this stupid, pointless, pathetic life gets a stupid, pointless, pathetic end. Twisting in his bedroll he braced himself for new pain.)*

He sighed to himself once more, then got to work. He processed two reports and prepped them to send to Qordis' ship. He'd just started the third when he heard a faint sound from the foyer: metal grinding on metal. Then he heard a faint hum as the battle droids powered on. He rose from his desk and looked into the foyer to find both machines had stepped into the middle of the room and raised their weapon-mounted arms toward the door.

"What the hell?" he bleated. "What's going on?"

"Please stand back, sir," a tinny droid voice said. "We will do everything to ensure your safety."

"What do you mean? Is someone?"

He got out nothing else before the office exploded in violence. The door was torn open as though by an invisible hand and the droids opened fire immediately. A figure rushed into the room like black wind. The body was wrapped in a whirling dark cloak, instant holed through by the hail of laserfire, but none of the blasts stopped it. Then a blazing

red-white light appeared in its fist and stretched to a half-meter.

Standing in the side doorway he froze in dumb shock. *A lightsaber.* He'd never thought he'd see one with his own eyes.

*(Seeing through another's eyes, Eli felt primal terror at the sight of himself. He was a nightmare in black and red, a promise of death some to end another life without barely a thought.)*

The black-robed figure stopped in the center of the foyer and threw out a hand palm-forward. The droids tipped, as though struck by a powerful wind, but their metal legs staggered to keep from falling and their laserfire didn't relent. Next one desk bracing the wall tipped toward the closest droid, forcing it to sidestep to avoid. The black figure- Jedi? Sith?- charged through the doorway at the right droid and bisected it with a horizontal swipe through the hip. The droid's upper half kept pumping out laserfire, scorching the ceiling as the torso fell, and the attacker barely sidestepped them before severing both arms from the body with a pair of low swipes.

This thing- Jedi or Sith- was a killing machine. Terrified, he ran back into his office and ducked behind the desk. He dared look over the edge and saw the figure charge the second droid, duck beneath two blasts, then rear up with a vertical swing that severed the machine from groin to head. The droid fell in two tall halves and was still. The monster looked down on the broken droid, perhaps in satisfaction. Its back was turned.

Instinct grabbed him. Qordis insisted they keep a blaster in the office; he had one tucked in his desk. He'd never thought he'd had to use it. With shaking hands he pulled open the bottom drawer, clasped the hold-out pistol between his palms, then braced his elbows on the desktop and opened fire at the black-cloaked back.

*(He never had a chance.)*

His gun shook and his shots went wide, but the monster seemed to sense them coming even before they left his pistol. The black-cloaked figure spun and deflects three shots with deft twitched of its lightsaber. The figure stalked toward him

with intent and as it got close he could see the face of the being who'd kill him.

It was just a teenager. A smooth pale face framed by messy black hair. Dark eyes that for a second seemed to flash gold. The lightsaber held high and vertical, ready for a downward blow.

*(And Eli remembered sight of the man peeking over his desk, blaster aimed but shaking. Just some old, fat, pointless man. The moment he'd seen that man, Eli'd known he was going to kill him. Enraptured in the dark side, bereft of empathy and drunk on power, he hadn't even hesitated.)*

Terror froze him; he couldn't even pull the trigger before the boy flicked his wrist, wrested the pistol from his hand and threw him into the wall behind him. He boy bounded the desk, then dropped in front of him, ragged cloak flaring like a preybird's wings as it came in for the kill. Black-gloved hands took his chin in a vice-grip and the red-white lightsaber hummed warmth inches from his eyes.

He was going to die here, like this, killed by a Sith.

His pointless empty life was going to end and he had no idea why.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

*(Neither did Eli as he writhed in bed. If he'd known the Force was going to subject him to this- experiencing his every murder through the eyes of those he'd killed- he'd have never come. He'd have never sought to regain the Force at all. He'd have fled far away and lived another life and tried to forget he'd even thought the way of the Sith would bring him liberation.)*

"Are you Nial Qorlis?" the boy said in a low growl.

He tried to wag his head. The boy loosened his grip enough for him to say, "N-Not him... He just left... S-s-said to stall anyone who came..."

*Please please please, he thought, don't kill me please I don't want to die.*

"Where did Qorlis go?"

"G-gone... Getting off this r-rock..."

The boy's face screwed up in anger. He glanced over his shoulder, at the carnage in the foyer, then back to his captive.

*(As he lay dreaming Eli couldn't even remember how he'd killed this man. A lightsaber thrust? A blow to the head or neck? He'd dealt so much death, casually and coldly but also proudly, because he's thought the way of the Sith was the only way to power.)*

The boy considered him for a moment, then drew the lightsaber away. He took a deep breath and felt relief flood through him. Then, his vision jerked to the right, too hard. He heard and felt something crack in his neck; his windpipe twisted too, so tight it closed out breath. He was staring into the wall but his body faced the opposite direction. Dully, he realized his neck had been snapped.

*(A painless death. So much better than the other dream-deaths Eli had suffered, but also worse. The dream lingered and held him and wouldn't let him go.)*

They said you could get your head cut straight off and live for another minute. Oxygen and electric impulses still in the brain. That minute lasted forever. He couldn't twitch his head back or move the dead meat of the body below his broken neck. He couldn't even cry, though he wanted to. After all his life's accident and mistakes and dead ends, all its droning pointlessness, he'd sometimes thought there was no point in going forward.

Now death was coming for him. Darkness crowded the edges of his vision and would take him soon, but not soon enough. In the silence of his mind he screamed and wept and wailed. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die. He didn't want the emptiness of his life to end in the final emptiness of death. There was so much he wanted to fix. So much he'd do over if he could.

*(If I could do it all over, Eli thought, I'd die with the other Jedi apprentices after their capture. I'd stand bravely before Darth Nihl and let the Sith cut him down. Then I'd be spared this for sure.)*

There was nothing for it. Darkness took forever to enclose him but it finally did. His mind howled vain protest until the end. In a bleak, sad, stupid way, it was a fitting death.

The dream released him. Eli opened his eyes and saw the star-packed sky overhead. His body didn't tremble with echoed knife-wounds, punches, or broken bones. All he felt

was an aching hollow inside, as if part of him had died with the man he'd murdered. Probably it had. He wondered if the Force was going to make him relieve every death he'd caused. If so, that meant he still had around a half-dozen to go. He wasn't even sure of the precise number. And once the Force had shown him all that, what then? He wasn't naïve enough to think the Force would leave him alone. It had descended on him and was hounding him and he didn't think he'd escape it until he left this world. Maybe not even then.

Eli wanted to turn back and march back to the gate, but he doubted he'd have the power to reopen it on his own. He needed these other three for that. He was trapped here in more ways than one.

So when they broke camp and continued their trek, now across a landscape grown jagged and hilly, thankfully with no more scars from a cosmic war. The sun was low in the sky and strange shadows stretched over the rocky earth. As Eli packed his things he thought he saw something in the corner of his eye. He rose and looked at the closest ridgetop and his breath caught in his chest. Three figures were standing there, shadows sides facing him, but in their dark shapes he could make out humanoid bodies, flat noseless faces, and large eyes.

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them. The Duros were still there. He groped out with the Force, an unfamiliar and awkward effort after missing it for so long. He felt something atop the ridge, something different.

"Khat Lah!" he called. "Skywalker!"

"What is it?" the latter said, moving a hand to his lightsaber.

Eli turned back to the ridge. Its crest was empty. He reached out with the Force this time and felt nothing besides the weird aura that hung over this entire planet.

"Nothing," he muttered. "I just... though I saw something."

Skywalker shrugged and went back to packing. Khat Lah looked at him for a moment more, leathery face unreadable. Then he looked away. Last was Kyra, standing most distant, pack already on her back. She held Eli's stare for a good ten seconds before turning.



He hoped it had been a hallucination brought on by stress and sleeplessness. He didn't want to think his nightmares were following him into waking.

Tired, frightened, perhaps a little mad, Eli marched with his companions beneath a sun the color of blood.

Kyra's experience with the Force had been next to nothing until now. Jao said she'd been using it unconsciously all her life, but her only deliberate connection with it had been in one meditation session right before she'd lost her powers. It had opened her to feeling she'd never known before, and after a year had ceased to remember.

What came to her on this world was something different. She almost felt submerged under water, pressed on all sides by something thick yet fluid that subtly distorted her surroundings. The difference was that this thing all around her didn't warp reality but sharpened it somehow. Insight came to her naturally, without effort. Since regaining the Force she had more energy and felt like she was marching longer every day.

Despite that, she wasn't happy. This place was too strange, and the experience of her mother's death lingered with her instead of fading like a dream should. Sometimes phantom pains- echoes of a cracked rib or twisted arm- would come on her and she'd struggle not to cry out. Skywalker and Khat Lah had used the Force to calm her pain that first night. Several nights later, she's quietly asked Skywalker if he could show her how. She was learning, gradually, to use this power. To swim in the strange waters that submerged her.

The Force came to her in other ways. Insight told her that Eli had been having more painful dreams. She didn't know what any of them entailed, not even his first one, and she didn't know enough about the young man to guess. She knew that, as a Sith apprentice, he must have done terrible things, and a part of her thought he deserved all the agonized nights he got. But when they marched toward the distant light she watched him and felt him in the Force, and she took no joy in his pain.

She wanted to talk to him about their experiences, to understand her own as much as his, but she always balked.

Whatever he was now, Eli had been a Sith apprentice. He'd nearly killed Jao. He was dangerous and she kept her distance.

Their long march had taken them over dusty plains, through ruined cities and around massive craters carved by ancient superweapons. They were passing over a spine of low mountains now, and as they began to gradual downhill climb Kyra could see the path ahead was different. Instead of an open plain it appeared to be a forest. The land ahead seemed darkened and dense with barren trees. That surprised her, as they'd seen no life at all on their trek, not even a slip of dry scrub. Khat Lah had said that life flourished near the Force-eruptions, and while they were getting closer to that light-pillar in the sky they weren't there yet, and the forest hardly looked flourishing.

As they got to the bottom of the slope and descended into the forest, things became clearer yet more confusing. The trees were mostly stout growths less than four meters high, with narrow trunks and crooked spread-out branches. Their trunks looked curiously smooth, not like bark at all. When they got close enough to touch, Kyra's hand confirmed what her eyes told her. The trees were made of stone. Every branch and every twig was hard rock, surface slightly worn by thousands or millions of years of light breeze.

"I don't understand," Kyra whispered as her fingers ran across a low branch. "How is this possible?"

"I do not know," Khat Lah admitted. "I have discovered other stone forests on this world. When this planet ascended to become a Whill, the trees must have been instantly petrified."

"And we have to pass through this to get where we want to go?" asked Eli.

"Unless we add local days to our voyage, yes."

"Then we go ahead," Cade said. "You know the best way through?"

"Of course."

The red sun was falling toward the far horizon. It cast long gnarled shadows through the stone forest. Though she knew there was no one else on this planet except them, the jagged darkness still filled Kyra with dread. As they entered the

forest, she felt the same primal fear emanating from Eli, Cade, and even Khat Lah.

Every so often a tiny breeze blew. It whistled very faintly through the stone forest but failed to move even the tiniest twig. It was a small thing, but it felt so wrong. Kyra found herself looking left and right as they moved through the stone, sometimes ducking to pass beneath low branches. With every step the complex tangle of dark shadow and red sunlight shifted, creating a new and menacing geography.

Sometimes she thought she saw movement among the shadows. Sometimes she stopped in her tracks and stared. Once she saw what looked like a human body moving through the forest.

“Did you see something?”

Eli’s voice, soft and right behind her, made her jump. “Dammit,” she snapped, “Don’t do that!”

“Did you see something?” he repeated, very serious.

“No,” she snapped, then corrected herself. “I don’t know. It was just... a trick of the light.”

She glanced fearfully at the place where she’d been movement. Nothing except the static tangle of black and red.

“Hey,” Skywalker called from up ahead, “You two all right?”

“We’re fine,” Kyra said after short hesitation. Eli said nothing at all. They continued walking.

As the march drew on, weariness warred with fear. Nobody said it, but nobody wanted to stop and sleep in the forest, at least not unless they found a clearing where the stone branches weren’t hanging like cage bars overhead. As she became tired Kyra stopped searching shadows for imagined movement, but she could feel Eli still paranoid behind.

The two of them started to lag a little further behind Skywalker and Khat Lah. She kept her eyes ahead to track them as they passed through shadow and red light. That was when she saw, unmistakably, a humanoid figure dash through the forest and cross onto the middle of the narrow path.

Kyra froze. The figure stopped and stared at her. In the darkness and distance she couldn’t tell much, but the face looked flat and large-eyed, like a Duros.

“Do you see it?” Eli asked behind her.

She didn’t jump or look back at him. She stared ahead as the Duros- if that was what it was- broke her stare and darted off the track, into the shadowy stone tangle.

“Did you *see* it?” Eli repeated.

“I... I saw it...” She finally turned around. His tired eyes were wide in fear.

“Hey!” Skywalker called from up the path. “Something wrong back there?”

Something was very wrong. Kyra and Eli hurried forward, as though they’d be safer close to Cade and Khat Lah.

“I saw someone in the forest,” Kyra said. “Eli saw it too. A Duros ran right through the center of the path.” She gestured at the shadows into which it had disappeared.

“What the hells?” Cade’s face crinkled.

“I saw three of them in the mountains when we woke up,” Eli added. “I... I didn’t think anyone else could see them.”

Kyra understood. “If you’ve seen Duros in your... your dreams... what are they doing here?”

Cade turned to Khat Lah. Eli and Kyra did too. The Yuuzhan Vong sighed heavily. “It is happening already. Strange. Usually we must draw closer to the eruption before they manifest.”

“Before *what* manifests?” asked Eli. “What are they? Some kind of Force-vision?”

“Nothing so simple.” He glanced at Cade. “You know that on Zonama Sekot, the living world can summon the spirits of those dead. It can also, on rare occasion, bind spirit to matter and give them form.”

“I’ve *heard* about it. But...” Cade trailed off as he tried to wrap his mind around this.

“What this world was, was like Sekot except exponentially more powerful. Even the echoes of its life-force do more than Sekot can, but lacking a collective consciousness the power has no form or direction save what *our* conscious minds give it.”

“You’re saying this world is... pulling them out of my dreams?” asked Eli.

“The Force is raw and on this world, and very powerful. One could do things here unthinkable in the rest of the

galaxy. I thought, because you are young and not fully trained, you would not draw on the Force like this, at least not so soon.”

Kyra looked around the jagged forest. The red sun was finally disappearing but silver starlight fell straight through the crooked stone branches, creating a new pattern of fear. “Can we get out of here? Please?”

“The nearest way out is to return the way he came. That will take hours. There is a clearing and a ridge not far ahead. We can set there for tonight.”

Kyra didn’t think she could sleep with the forest encroaching on all sides, but she didn’t see any other way. This place had to be passed through.

When nobody replied right away, Khat Lah said, “Come. I will lead the way.”

He turned and began walking forward again. Cade sent Kyra and Eli what encouragement he could through the Force, then followed. Together, Kyra and Eli did the same. The group huddled close as they passed through the forest. The things that had kept them separate no longer seemed to matter. Whatever this was, dream or nightmare or something else, they were in it together now.

Darth Talon sat on the canyon floor, legs crossed, back straight, head lifted high to stare at the hypergate arch. She’d watched the gate for hours and would watch it for hours more, just as she had yesterday. When she wasn’t watching the gate she sulked in her cave. Her Yuuzhan Vong warders still followed her like lagging shadows, but even they were getting bored of the task.

That was the point, of course. When the catastrophic news had come down she’d wanted to grab her ship, fly clear of Rohalla, and blast a comm signal to any Sith she could find. She was that desperate not to be alone. Eli should have helped her, but instead he’d taken Khat Lah’s offer to travel through the gate. She’d been angry at him, bitterly so, but once he left her anger cooled and she admitted that, were she in his place, she’d have done the same thing. All her life she’d had two constants: the Force gave her strength and the

Sith gave her purpose. Now, when the Sith might be truly gone, it felt even more imperative to regain the Force.

But she wasn't ready to give up on her kind yet. She waited. She repeated patterns and spent hours gazing at the arch in apparent contemplation, and she didn't need the Force to tell her that her captors were getting bored. Soon they would leave their guard down, and then she could make her escape. Eli had given her his lightsaber as a parting gift, and she'd thought of how to use it.

Talon didn't know what she could get when she escaped this place and broadcast her message to the Sith. Expectation was a distraction she couldn't afford. She'd decided the steps needed to get out of here and assumed them into her being until she didn't need to think about them, which would risk giving her plans away in the Force.

So she waited. When the blue and white suns fell away she would act, and then she'd be free of this place. After that the Sith- her purpose- would find her, or they would not. That part was out of her hands.

Talon waited and watched the arch. Soon, she thought. Soon there'd be the chance for everything.

## Chapter Seventeen

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Pieces were falling into place, making a picture that was close to clear, and yet so far.

Everyone gathered in *Starlight Champion's* hold, ringed around a large holographic image of the Department of Transportation tower. The data Oren had sliced from the site's public terminal had been overlaid with the telemetry information from Sauk's tracking devices. They still couldn't pinpoint the empress' exact location within the building, but Sauk and Oren were confident they'd narrowed it down to within a fifty-meter radius located at least twenty storeys beneath the levels currently staffed by the transit department. On the holo, the target zone was marked by a pulsing white light.

Marasiah Fel was somewhere inside that light. Marin Skirata, leaning forward, stared into the glow and contemplated all she might find there.

"The way I see it, getting close should be easy," Hondo Karr was saying beside her. He stuck out a finger and tracked vertical lines on the holo that marked lift shafts stretching from the highest levels to the unused depths.

"The lift cars are probably gonna be programmed to stop at a certain depth," Yangar said. "They might even have physical blockers inside the shafts to keep people from going down where they're not wanted."

"The shafts are still there, though," said Ganner. "And if we need to, we can cut through."

"You mean with your lightsaber?" asked Sauk.

"Exactly."

It had been a long, long time since Marin had wielded one of those. She knew she might well again; she'd be most useful to this party inside the transit building, searching for Marasiah and the Force-void she was trapped in.

"That building is public-access, but front-door security is pretty good," said Oren. "Are you sure you can get that saber through the weapons-scanners?"

"I can take care of that." Marin said it softly, but everyone deferred. She added, "I can't guarantee I can get blasters through."

"Hopefully we won't need the things at all," Sauk said, with little confidence.

"Are we sure we want to come through the front door?" asked Oren. "What about those service entrances on the lower levels? They're closer to the empress."

Marin shook her head. "The portal Chalk uses is heavily monitored. The other ones are probably sealed shut, and besides, there are still aerial patrols flying around the area. If we try to break in from the outside we'll be spotted."

"Agreed," said Hondo. "But when we grab the empress, we're gonna have to punch out fast. Can't go out the front door that time."

"Then," said Marin, "We'll have to take her out the service entrance. Best plan is to knock out the cameras from the inside, if we can, then have *Champion* swoop in for a pick-up."

"We'll still have half of Coruscant's security on our butts," warned Oren. "That'll make it hard to punch out."

"I have an idea for that," said Ganner. "The start of Stazi's trial is less than a week away. The justice center will be swarming with security."

"And the justice center's just a couple minutes away by speeder," Tes said sourly.

"That's not a bad thing," Ganner said firmly. "If the slightest unusual thing happens there, even more security will come rushing. It can work perfectly as a distraction, if we do it right."

"What are you thinking?" asked Oren.



"For a start, I think we'll need your slicer skills," Ganner told him. "I think I know how I can get you access to the security system in the justice center. Shut it down and you'll cause a panic that'll draw every policeman on Coruscant."

"And what happens when the police come looking for us?"

"We hide in plain sight. I think Master Sinde will help us."

"You think?" Yanger said skeptically.

"I'll need to confirm it. If this doesn't work there are still other options. Help from the Alliance, for one."

"That would be nice," said Sauk. "When we comm Ania to tell her what's going on, I have information from Senator Gahan to pass on."

"Have you told the senator about Marasiah?" asked Marin.

"No, but she does know I can get in touch with Admiral Bey's fleet. She has a message and some documents for him."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate those," said Oren. "Maybe enough to lend us a helping hand."

"The biggest thing we need is a distraction," said Marin. "The team that actually goes to retrieve the empress has to be small. I'll volunteer to take point."

Sauk raised a flipper. "I should probably come too, in case you need mechanical help."

Marin nodded and looked to Ganner. "I know you want to come, and I won't stop you, but think if there's anyplace else you need to be. Creating a distraction at the justice center is just as important."

She felt his eagerness in the Force, tainted by indecision. As he considered, Hondo asked, "Who gets to be our get-away driver? Distraction or no, that can get pretty hairy." He eyed Marin. "Who do you trust to fly this rustbucket?"

She'd inherited this ship from her father and had an appropriately protective streak, but successful escape trumped all other priorities. "I'll take the best pilot I can get," she said simply.

Ganner, still thoughtful, said, "I think I may be able to help with that."

In the privacy of a meditation room inside the Jedi Temple, Ganner sat across from Shado Vao. The Twi'lek sat with

legs crossed, elbows on knees and hands folded. He listened to what Ganner's words with folded hands, and when the Imperial Knight finished he remained bowed, as though expecting more to be said.

Ganner prodded, "I've told you what we're going to do. You know what my offer is. Help us rescue the empress."

"And you're sure she'd inside? You're truly certain?"

"I am."

Shado lifted his head. His gaze was skeptical, as though he suspected Ganner of some grand delusion. "What do you think I can do? I'm just..."

"You're the same thing as me. A knight stripped of the Force. But we can still *act*, Shado." He considered telling him about Marin Skirata and her connection to the Force, but that was one secret to hold to, for now.

"But what can we *do*, specifically?"

"It depends on what help we can get from the Alliance, but the plan is to split into three teams. The first sabotages the justice center and draws extra security teams there as a distraction. The second infiltrated the transit building and locates Marasiah. The third stands by in a ship to evacuate the second."

"When they get the empress."

"Exactly. By that point we'll probably have half of Coruscant security on our butts so we'll have to run fast."

Shado snorted. "This isn't going to be an adventure. Not like old times."

"No," Ganner admitted, though a part of him thought it might be. In conjuring this rescue scheme he felt like he was finally accomplishing *something*. He felt alive in a way he hadn't since Maladi had turned him into a plague vector.

"Where do you think I can be useful?" asked Shado.

"Wherever you feel comfortable. I recall you used to be a fine pilot."

"One of the Order's best," he allowed a sour smile. "What kind of ship do you have?"

An antique. Ganner said, "It's docked over at Eastport. I'll let you take a look at it, if you want."

It was a transparent ploy, but it got a reluctant smile from Shado. "Why are you going so far to recruit me, Ganner?"

*Because you remind me so much of myself.* But again Ganner held back the truth. “I think our mission need someone just like you.”

Shado shook his head ruefully, and Ganner knew he was getting to him. “Another question. How do you expect to sabotage the justice center? You said you’ll be staging a distraction at the start of the trial. The place will be absolutely swarming with security.”

“That’s when it helps to have an inside man,” Ganner smirked.

He’d really enticed Shado now. The Twi’lek asked, “Who? I understand if you can’t tell me...”

“It’s Master Sinde.”

The head of the Imperial Knights. Shado stewed that over. “Are you sure you can trust him?”

“I don’t know a man I’d trust more.” None still living, anyway.

Shado looked down at his hands, still anxiously clawing into one another. “All this... and you don’t even know for sure the empress is alive.”

“She is,” Ganner said. “And so is our hope for the future.”

After a pause Shado asked, “Have you heard anything about Cade?”

“Not yet. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” The Twi’lek exhaled, straightened, and finally broke his hands apart. “We can’t just sit around waiting for a Skywalker to save us, can we?”

“Definitely not.” Ganner rose from his seat and stepped across the room. “Will you help us, Master Vao?”

He held a hand in front of Shado’s face. The Twi’lek stared at it, considering all it meant and the future it would unlock. Then one of Shado’s rose and took it. Ganner squeezed, white clasp blue, and pulled him up.

## Chapter Eighteen

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They stepped out of a veil of smoke, down the catwalk connecting the landing pad to the temple. An unseen hand lifted the piled bodies of dead stormtroopers and casually dumped them over the railing. Seven Sith warriors, their bodies marked by vicious patterned tattoos, marched imperiously toward the two battered Jedi.

Most of their bodies were patterned in reds and blacks, but the one in the lead was a tall thin humanoid with long black hair and a chalky white face. It could only be Darth Nihl, the vicious warrior he'd last faced on Coruscant, and who'd nearly been the end of him.

"These are the last," the Nagai said. "Finish them and our master's will is accomplished."

"What?" he called, "No demand for us to surrender, Sith?"

"My master will not make Palpatine's mistake," Nihl said. "All Jedi must die."

*(Cade had seen this before. He'd watched from the window of the shuttle as the Sith charged his father and his father valiantly held the walkway chokepoint and kept them from the landing pad. Every bit of it was emblazoned in his memory after all these years.)*

The Sith charged. He and Wolf Sazen were there to meet him but Nihl was fast. The Nagai ducked beneath his blow and snapped a side-kick that took the Jedi in the stomach. He staggered back. Thighs hit the catwalk railing and he struggled to keep balance.

At the same time Nihl fought back a series of blows from Wolf, then spun his long-bodied lightsaber around and jabbed its butt into Wolf's sternum, cracking bone. That stunned the Zabrak long enough for Nihl to spin his blade back around and cut off Wolf's arm at the elbow.

*(Cade writhed in angry sleep. He shouldn't have to experience this again, no through his father's eyes. He raged at the Force but the Force wouldn't release him from the nightmare vision.)*

Before Nihl could land the killing blow he struck out in a long horizontal slash. The Sith bent backward to evade it. He called Wolf's lightsaber to his hand and stood between the Sith and his friend, the Sith and his son.

"I am Kol Skywalker, servant of the Living Force! None of you will pass!"

*(The Living Force that permeated the air here. It had grown thicker still as they entered the stone forest. By the time they reached the eruption point Cade knew it would be choking.)*

The other Sith finally joined in. On the narrow catwalk only two of them could attack him at a time, but even with two blades it was a struggle to hold them back. He tried to hold the center but they kept striking at his flanks. Soon three Sith crowded the catwalk in front of him and he had no hope of stopping them.

Then a blond-haired blur rolled in from behind, beneath his right saber. Cade popped to his feet and took the enemy in front of him by surprise. An upward thrust caught the Sith in the gut and he gave the wavering body a nudge in the Force to knock it into the one beside him.

"I'm here, father! You don't fight alone!" His son's grin was white, proud, angry.

*(Such a damned cocky kid even then, Cade thought with mixed shame and admiration. A wonder he was still alive.)*

"No!" He shouted. "Every moment you delay here you endanger the lives on board that shuttle. This is *not* how you were taught!"

"I won't leave you!"

As the Sith pulled their wounded back and regrouped for another attack, he told his son, "You're putting your own

wants- your own desires- ahead of your duties, ahead of the needs of others!”

Another Sith came at him. He batted back the attack and looked over his shoulder. Cade was on his knees beside Wolf's broken form. “You're a *Skywalker*, Cade! *Act* like one! Help your master onto the shuttle and leave!”

*(This was the moment Cade remembered better than any other. For many, many years he wished he'd stood with his father, fought, and died rather than live to endure the life that followed. It had taken a long time for that to change. He thanked Blue for that and Jariah, and though he hated it right now, he had to thank the Force too.)*

Cade's desperation settled into beaten determination. He bent low, pulled Wolf onto his back, and called on the Force to give him the strength to rise.

His son growled, “As you command... Master.” And then Cade was gone.

He felt his son retreat. He turned his attention to the Sith in front of him. They came two at a time, three at a time. He used both lightsabers against them, defending with one hand and attacking with the other. He pushed Wolf's blade into the stomach of one Sith, then used his own to cleave the arm off another. A glancing blow cut across his forearm but he ignored the pain. Another stabbed him in the thigh, tearing muscle. He should have dropped to his knees for the pain but he ignored the wound, pirouetted on his good leg, and struck the head off his attacker.

*(Cade had never seen this part, but he'd felt it even as he bent over Wolf in the shuttle cockpit, willing life back into him and drawing on the dark anger that would dominate his life for years to come. He found himself transfixed, no longer pained or even angry. Strangely, he was grateful for this chance to see his father's final moments through his father's eyes.)*

Suddenly Darth Nihl was before him. The Sith attacked more savagely than the others. He could feel the Nagai's anger in the Force, and with it a raw lust for violence. Nihl was giving all of himself to the Force's dark side, forgetting every other desire beside his urge to kill. It was almost flattering. He countered Nihl's angry lust with deepest calm. He blocked

attack after attack, and when Nihl tried to whip the butt of his long-bodied saber in his face the Jedi bent backwards, lowered his blade, and swiped at Nihl's hips.

The Sith evaded, then went for his knees. He jumped high, held himself in mid-air for a split-second, then came down-

*(And then the Force let him go.)*

"Skywalker, get up!" a voice said, and two hands shoved his shoulder. Cade's eyes popped open and he rolled onto his back. Overhead a skyscape of stars, partially occluded by head and shoulders. Long hair dangled and brushed his face. Kyra.

He immediately rolled away from her, onto his stomach, and pushed himself off the ground. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

The girl didn't answer right away. He jumped to his feet and got away from his bedspread. The four of them had laid out their sleeping blankets close together on top of the low hill that just barely breached the treeline of the stone forest. Bright starlight shone down on petrified branches that stretched out for kilometers in all direction. Khat Lah was getting to his feet, and Eli was already out of his bedspread.

Dumbly the kid muttered, "I slept tonight... I could actually sleep..."

"Maybe 'cause the Force was bothering me instead." Cade ignored his questioning stare and lunged for his pack. He grabbed his lightsaber and asked, "Can someone please tell me what the kark's got you all spooked?"

Looking out from the hilltop Khat Lah said, "Something moves in the forest."

"You mean Eli's Duros buddies?"

"Perhaps."

Still clasping his saber, Cade fished around for his binoculars. Before he found them Eli shouted, "There! Look!"

Cade looked. They all watched as two figures lurched out of the forest and started up the hill. Their bodies were too wide to be Duros, or human for that matter. They had no necks to speak of and conical heads. They seemed to walk with the brittle staggered of the aged. The species was vaguely familiar, some Outer Rim race, but Cade couldn't place it.

Kyra rasped, "What are *they* doing here?"

"You know them?" Eli swung on her.

"No!" she shook her head. "They just... in my dream... I never thought..."

"Are they dangerous?" Cade gripped his saber tight.

"No. I mean, they never meant any of us harm... They just... They were too *slow*."

The others looked at her, understanding nothing. Then Khat Lah, voice strangely calm, said, "There are others."

He pointed, and their eyes followed. A small herd of being were mounting the hill from the other side. Their tall gangly bodies were dressed in some kind of uniform and the faces were flat gray-green. Definitely Eli's Duros. They moved up the hill faster, and though he couldn't believe they were real, Cade felt their violent intent in the Force.

"What the hells is this?" He shook Khat Lah by the shoulder. "Are those things real? Can they hurt us?"

The Yuuzhan Vong looked to Eli. "Only if he wishes them to."

The young man's jaw went slack. "What do you mean? I can't... I can't control them!"

"Are they *real*?" Cade repeated. If Eli's and Kyra's dreams were being made manifest, then his-

A so-familiar sound pierced the clearing. A lightsaber hummed but not his own. Cade turned toward the sound and saw a lone figure marching up the hill. A lightsaber with an arm-length hilt blazed red in its hand. The body was tall and athletic, with broad shoulders and a wasp-waist. Long black hair flowed around a face tattooed in jagged monochrome.

When the head lifted high, Darth Nihl's eyes blazed red-gold in the night.

"That's not possible!" Cade spat. "You... He's dead! He got his karking head blown off!"

"There is no death here," Khat Lah muttered. "There is only the Force."

The Yuuzhan Vong ducked into his bag, pulled out two coufees with long double-sided blades and removed them from their sheathes. He grasped one in his right hand by the pommel; the other he flipped in his left and held out by the blade.

"They will not harm us unless you want them to," he said. "But if they attack, you must defend yourselves."



There weren't enough weapons to go around. Kyra stared at the coufee a second too long; Eli lashed out and grabbed it. He pivoted to face the mob of approaching Duros. They didn't seem to have weapons in hand but fists and feet would be enough.

Then Cade remembered how Reikar Horn had died. He knew what came at them now, and he knew that Eli could no longer will the Duros harmless any more than he could Nihl.

"What happens now?" Cade barked at Khat Lah. "Do we have to fight them?"

"Only if you will it."

"Dammit! Can they *kill* us?"

A long, long heartbeat.

"Yes."

Kyra swore under her breath. Those two old aliens- Jeodu?-were plodding up the hill but the others were much closer. Khat Lah held his coufee like a practiced warrior and faced the Duros. The Yuuzhan Vong wasn't letting much slip through the Force but Cade felt something he hadn't expected: eagerness. He had leftover hate for Reikar Horn's killers too.

And as for Nihl-

Cade turned, and the Sith was on him. Leaving the Duros to Khat Lah and Eli, Cade threw himself into battle against his father's killer. He didn't know if this was really Nihl, some strange illusion, or both at once. He *felt* real in the Force, a vehicle for barely-controlled spite like he'd been in life. The Nagai weaved his blade back and forth, forcing Cade on the defensive. His green lightsaber deflect Nihl's again and again until he caught it and forced it back at the Sith's face.

Lifelike surprise showed on Nihl's face as he was forced back a step. Cade pressed his advantage and slashed at him. Nihl ducked and swiped at Cade's feet; he saw it coming and somersaulted over the Nagai's head, dipping his blade down in hopes of a cranial strike. Nihl, too, ducked and rolled. They landed, spun, and faced each other from two meters apart. Behind Nihl, he could see Eli and Khat Lah face off with the Duros while Kyra stared at her Jeodu ghosts.

Nihl charged. He spun his lightsaber one-handed and while Cade evaded the red blade, he couldn't miss the long metal pommel that smacked him in the side of the face. It hurt worse

than any punch and he staggered downhill. Nihl gathered his blade in both hands and made a thrusting lunge. Cade sidestepped, just missing the strike. Nihl, moving downhill, overbalanced and Cade slammed a knee into the Sith's diaphragm. He retched, gasped for breath, then reared up. His free hand formed a fist, lashed out, and knocked Cade in the face.

Cade let the blow spin his body, and spinning he lifted his saber up, right through Nihl's sword-arm. Just like he had years back, when they'd fought in Krayt's throne room.

Just as before, Nihl opened his mouth for a cry of pain. This time no sound came. Cade swept out with one leg and knocked Nihl's legs out from under him. The Sith fell, landed on his side, and rolled down the hill, away from his lightsaber.

"I don't know if you're real or not, you karking murglack," Cade spat, "But you fall for the same damn tricks!"

Last time Cade hadn't been able to finish him off, though not for lack of wanting. Back then Krayt had fallen on him; this time it was just Cade and this strange half-living specter of the man who'd killed his father.

Nihl tried to rise with one hand. Cade stood over him, looked down, and found he didn't hate him, not really. He'd once hated Nihl with a burning passion because he hated the man Nihl had created, but he was done with that hate, just like he was done with the Sith. He knew too well that the harm they did to you was matched only by the harm they made you inflict on yourself.

"Get the hell out," Cade said, and shut off his lightsaber. "I'm done with you."

And as he watched, Darth Nihl's body turned to light, and the light became a column of bright motes that dissolved in a luminous skyward whirl.

Someone cried out behind him. No rest for the righteous, Cade thought, then turned and ran.

Khat Lah was holding back two Duros with his coufee, but two more were mobbing Eli. The young man had defended himself and torn holes in the Duros' militia uniforms but they kept at him, knocking his weapon from his hand and then knocking him to the floor. Eli rolled to evade their crushing stomps but they crowded him on both sides and prevented him

from standing. As he ran to help Cade realized the kid wasn't using Sith lighting in his defense, though he could have.

"Get back! Back!" Cade shouted. "Pick on someone your own size, sleemos!"

The two attacking Eli stopped to look at him. Cade ran close and waved his green blade in a warning arc but they didn't back off.

"Fine, have it your way," he grunted. "You ain't my nightmare."

He lunged forward and unleashed a horizontal slash. The Duros tried to back away but Eli grabbed both of them by a leg and planted them in place. Cade's saber took them across the abdomen, cutting clothes and flesh with no effort. The bodies flailed and fell back-

-and disappeared before they hit the ground. There was no turning to light, no spiraling starflies. They were just gone.

Cade looked sideways. The ones Khat Lah had been fighting were gone too. The Yuuzhan Vong lowered his coufe and exhaled; it sounded like disappointment.

The hilltop was suddenly silent except for labored breathing. They all looked to Kyra, who stood on the hilltop, staring downslope. The two old Jeodu stared at her. None of them moved.

"Kyra," Cade said, "You have to-"

He didn't even finish. The aliens faded and were gone. No light of release from them, either.

Kyra watched the empty space where they'd been. Eli uttered her name next, and she finally turned around. Thin tear-trails glistened on her cheeks and her eyes locked dead on Khat Lah.

"What was that?" she croaked. "Explain it to me. Please."

"I cannot explain, not fully," he admitted. "But I can try."

The only place on Rohakalla where Jariah felt vaguely comfortable was inside *Mynock*, but even his well-worn cabin didn't give the comfort he needed. He turned sleepless in his bunk for hours until he gave up and got out. He walked carefully through the silent ship, stopping outside the cabin Blue and Cade shared. He heard nothing and hoped Deliah, at least, was sound asleep.

Even though the Kwa had offered them beds in the cave complex, nobody had taken them up on it, not even Lowbacca and Jao, who were ensconced in their own bunks tonight. As Jariah walked the dim familiar corridors it actually felt peaceful in here, but it didn't take off his edge.

He stepped softly down to the main hold, which they'd left open to the outside. As he stepped down the ramp he heard the sound of something rolling on the rocky ground and turned, unsurprised to see R2-D2 wheeling away from the canyon edge.

"Long time no visit," Jariah told the droid. "Where's Threepio? Still doing his scholar act?"

The droid gave a low-pitched murmur he took for an affirmative. As the droid rolled close he patted its domed top. "Bet you need to recharge or something. Go ahead, the power port's open. Go ahead and plug in."

R2-D2 whistled. It sounded like a question but Jariah didn't know about what. Cade had developed a pretty uncanny ability to make sense of R2's tweets, chirps, and whines, but they were beyond him. The droid repeated the same sound.

"Hell, Artoo, I don't know," he sighed. "I'm sure Cade could answer ya... but I don't know when he'll be back."

R2 made a cooing noise, then rolled out from beneath his hand and crawled up the ramp. Maybe Jariah had answered its question after all.

He was still edgy. The cool night air helped calm, but when he looked up he saw a black sky totally devoid of clouds or starlight, and it reminded him how close to the edge they were, literally and figuratively. He sighed and walked away from *Mynock*, over to the canyon rim. He looked down at the hypergate arch, still ringed by torches and a few watchkeepers. If he could reach through that thing and pull Cade out right now, he would.

But of course that wasn't happening. He didn't know what *was* happening, only that he- Jariah Syn, son of Zareb Syn, as tough and independent as any barve to ply the spacelanes- was merely along for the ride.

"Damn you Cade," he muttered, "What did you do to me, *pateesa*?"

He stared at the arch for a little while, then decided to try and sleep again. He only got a few steps toward *Mynock* when something caught his eye. It wasn't near his ship but beyond, a shadow moving through darkness toward the parked Sith scout ship.

Jariah's heart beat fast. He ducked beneath *Mynock's* outstretched wing and edged toward the scout as quietly as he could. Somebody was there all right, but in this damn low light it was hard to tell who.

Then the ship's landing ramp began to lower. Pale light from inside the ship fell outward, and Jariah could clearly see a slim female body with twin lekku trailing off the head. The second the ramp hit dirt Darth Talon started up it, and on instinct he sprinted toward her. The woman heard him and turned.

"Stop right there *schutta*," Jariah barked and reached for his blaster. "One move and I—"

His hand froze at his waist and his feet skidded to a halt. He'd left his blaster in the ship.

"Oh," he said, "Oh kark."

Talon lunged at him. A lightsaber extended from either fist and she thrust both right at him. Force or no Force she was fast, and he only managed to dodge one. The second caught him in the stomach. Jariah screamed as hot pain spread up from his flank, or he tried to. His legs fell out from under him and his face was suddenly in the dirt.

This was a stupid way to die. Even his dad's had been better. Jariah found strength in one arm and rolled onto his side. Talon hadn't bothered with a finishing blow; she was already darting up inside her ship. Jariah watched as the landing ramp retracted, swallowing up the ship's inner light. Everything else became a blur. He felt like he was plunging into darkness he could never climb out of.

He heard the warming of the scout's engines but a high wail sounded above them. R2-D2, he thought weakly. He'd need something besides an astromech to fix his kind of hurt. The droid kept wailing at his side as the scout's engines grew louder. The world had gotten too dark and he didn't see the ship lift off, only the muted glow of its engines as they flared to life overhead. With one final roar, Talon was gone.

The second she was gone somebody else fell beside Jariah. He felt someone shake him and hear her shout, "Jariah! Stang it, talk to me! Jariah!"

Hands rolled him onto his back and the world was brighter again. His eyelids fluttered against the light R2-D2 was shining as Deliah crouched beside him. Though his vision blurred he made out two more figures racing toward him from *Mynock*: Jao and Lowbacca.

"That Sith witch stabbed him!" Deliah snarled.

Jao crouched beside him and looked at the wound. Jariah didn't have the strength to lift his head and see for himself, but the Imp's face twisted in a wince.

Lowbacca gave a series of fast barks that Jariah couldn't mentally translate. Deliah, though, got it all. "Right. We need to take him down. Get those karking Kwa to Force-heal him!"

"Wait," Jao said, "What about Talon? She's going to call her Sith pals here! We've got to stop her!"

Deliah, bless her, looked ready to smack the Imp and say she didn't care about their Force wars, just her friend. But even when she was mad she saw reason too. "Lowie, take Jariah and get him help. Now." To Jao she said, "You and me are going after the *schutta*."

Lowbacca barked something else.

Deliah snapped her fingers. "Right, the tracker should still be on her ship."

"I just hope we catch up to her before she can call her pals," said Jao.

"Either way I'm gonna vape her. Come on!"

Deliah and Jao sprinted toward *Mynock* and R2-D2 rolled after them, faster than Jariah had ever seen it move. Lowbacca stayed with him. Bending low, the Wookiee picked him up as gently as possible, but the movement still sent fresh pain twisting through Jariah. It was getting dark now, dark and cold.

He tried to fight it and used anger to keep him awake. This would be a stupid way to die. Jariah didn't care if it took Force magic to do it, he wanted to live.

As *Mynock*'s engines began to warm, Lowbacca hurried over to the canyon rim while cradling Jariah to his chest. As he the engines started to roar he stood on the edge, tilted his

head back, and bellowed a Wookiee howl into the black, black sky.

They crossed the stone forest as quickly as they could, without once stopping for rest. After what had happened, no one was in the mood for sleep. Kyra peered into every shadow, searching for more movement. She was more confused and terrified than she'd ever been in her life but she knew she hadn't taken the worst of it; Cade and Eli still bore bruises from the fight.

As they walked Khat Lah tried to explain it to them the best he could. "Clearly they were summoned by your own thoughts. Whether the Nihl you fought was in any sense the true Nihl, or just an incarnate shadow, I cannot say."

"Well that's *grancha* helpful," Cade grunted. "You were right, though. I told Nihl to kark off and he did."

"I didn't want to fight them," Eli said. "They almost killed me. But I couldn't stop them."

"Did you want to hurt them?" asked Khat Lah.

In a low voice, the young man admitted, "Yes."

"Then you wanted to fight them."

"They just faded away," Cade said. "They didn't dissolve in light like Nihl did. Does that mean they'll be back?"

"It is likely."

That left Kyra even more disturbed. She knew what the figures she'd conjured were: the two old Jeodu who'd hobbled down the stairway too slow. If they hadn't been there, or if they'd gone faster, her entire family might have gotten to the shelter before the TIEs blew the top half of the apartment block off. They might all have lived, and her life would have been completely different.

She'd never thought of them with hate before, like Skywalker had for the Sith who'd killed his father. She hadn't even remembered them until the Force-vision a few days ago. The old couple had done nothing wrong, only been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They'd died that day, just as her parents, and could pay no higher price. There was no reason to hold malice toward them.

And yet, without willing it, without even thinking about it, she hated them.

She didn't know how Skywalker had willed Darth Nihil away, or how she could get rid of the ghosts haunting her. These ones weren't physically dangerous like the Sith or the Duros, but that was small comfort.

Everything on this world was strange and unpredictable. A little later, as they drew closer to the forest edge, Khat Lah explained, "On other worlds the Living Force is weaker, but it functions the same way. It reaches inside you and moves us, but we also move it. Or focus determines the reality around us. On this world the Force is so strong and so raw that our thoughts shape reality without our even trying. Being here, I think, may be the closest any of us ever get to knowing how a Whill feels."

Kyra didn't want to know how a Whill felt. She wanted to get out of here, forget the Force ever existed, and try to live a normal life far from everything. She could feel that Eli felt the same way, but Cade and Khat Lah pressed onward, drawn by the light-pillar now thicker in the sky than ever.

There was no turning back, and she told herself she had to be ready for whatever lay ahead. When they finally escaped the stone tangles of the forest they were all exhausted, and they cautiously agreed to make camp on the uphill slope and rest. Kyra's sleep was mercifully dreamless. From his relieved expression the following morning- what passed for morning- she gathered Eli's had also been restful.

The day ahead might bring anything, and before setting out Kyra made a request.

"I want to practice with your lightsaber," she told Cade firmly.

He raised a blond brow. "We've got only one of these, darling, and it's mine to keep."

"I know, but if something comes after us again I want to know how to defend myself. Jao and Lowbacca used to give me lessons. It's not like I've never held one before."

"Yeah, I remember." Cade looked to Khat Lah. "Think maybe we should do a slow start this morning."

"That is perfectly acceptable." The Yuuzhan Vong drew out his short-blade couffees, which he now kept strapped to his belt.

"I want to practice too," Eli told them.



“Blades ain’t gonna get rid of what’s after you,” Cade reminded, and looked to Kyra. “You neither, *cheeka*.”

“I know,” she said, “But I’d feel more confident going ahead.”

So they practiced. The uneven terrain was different than the flat hold on *Mynock* and it was difficult for Kyra to get good footing, but she practiced slow-motion thrusts and parries, sometimes flicking Cade’s lightsaber against Khat Lah’s coufee, sometimes the other way around. Eli practiced as well, and after a short show of reluctance, Cade let the young man borrow his lightsaber.

They went slowly so as not to exhaust themselves, and after a few hours they ended by a short spar between Kyra and Eli, both wielding the coufes. The Sith apprentice was simply better than her: faster, more sure on his feet, more in control of his wrist and arm movements. Nonetheless, she sensed no malice from him, only a singular concentration on fighting well.

After the fight they continued their march, this time through rugged hills. The light in the sky was indeed growing brighter, and when she asked Khat Lah how close they were to the eruption he answered vaguely that they were nearer their destination than the gate.

She was a little more confident that she could defend herself, but that didn’t make her any less paranoid. Kyra still scanned the surrounding ridges, watching for any movement in the supposedly-lifeless landscape. A few times she thought she spotted silhouettes shifting far away; her heart beat fast and she whispered to Eli, asking if he’d seen anything. He never did, but her questions were making him paranoid too.

When they set down for rest again the red sun was high in the sky, casting the mountains in a sick bloody pallor. Though she was tired she couldn’t sleep, and after twisting in her bedspread she slid herself out of it, stood up, and looked around. The other three lay flat in their bedrolls, unmoving. Even Eli was still, and she wondered whether his recurring dreams had finally ended. She hoped they had, for his sake. She hadn’t started this expecting to feel empathy for the Sith apprentice, but it was clear now he was just as frightened and scared as her.

For a while she watched the red sun and listened to silence. Then she bent over her pack, reached deep inside, and found the object she'd stuck in the very bottom of its contents. As she took out the smooth-sided black pyramid she clutched it between both hands, as though shielding it from view of her sleeping companions. She knew this holocron was a Sith tool, but when she'd first touched it back on the cave on Socorro, it's spontaneous emission of light had been her first hint of the power she possessed. Even now when she stroked it she felt a hint of wonder.

Clutching the holocron close, Kyra walked away from the camp until it was barely visible. Turning her back to it she sat on the ground and held the holocron in front of her. Before her eyes, light danced up from its edges and converged over the pyramid top, then resolved in the form of a woman with thick braids hanging off either shoulder and a hood covering her face. It still looked magical.

"My name is Darth Traya," the woman said. "For what purpose do you seek my knowledge?"

Kyra hesitated. She'd never interacted further with the holocron; she'd never had the chance to. She'd heard these things contained merely a set of computer routines programmed to speak through the image of a long-dead Sith Lord, but as she stared into the darkness of the hooded face she felt like she was looking at a ghost as real as anything on this world.

"I don't know much about the Force," Kyra said, "But I'm starting to get it's more powerful and dangerous than anything I ever imagined."

"The Force is often a cruel master," the holocron said. "It guides us to destinations without telling us why. It strengthens some beings and weakens others. If you are learning this now, you are learning the most important thing about the Force."

"How can I stop being afraid of it?" she whispered. She knew any answer from a Sith device wasn't going to be trustworthy, but maybe she could glean something from it.

"If you are wise," Darth Traya said curtly, "you would separate yourself from the Force entirely. The gifts it offers seldom compare to the price it takes."

This wasn't what she'd expected from a Sith device. Very truthfully Kyra said, "I can't do that right now. I just can't."

"Then you must enact your will upon the Force. It is a difficult task, requiring concentration and power."

"I'm not sure I have either of those things."

"Then you must gain them," the woman said sharply. "You speak to a vessel designed to teach. I offer you lessons that will help you wrestle the Force to submission. Will you take them and see your will done?"

That sounded more Sith-y. Right now Kyra wasn't sure what her will was either; she wasn't sure of anything. "I just don't want to feel... out of control."

"Then you must *take* control. If your concentration and power are great enough, the Force will naturally bend itself to your will. To achieve this, you must first find inner strength."

It reminded her of what Khat Lah had said. "You're saying before I get any control over the Force, I have to control myself."

"Yes. On that every school, from Jedi to Sith, agrees. Again, will you take my lessons?"

Kyra felt a slight tug of temptation, but whispered, "No thanks. I'll try and figure things out on my own."

"Then perhaps there is hope for you yet." Surprisingly, Darth Traya sounded pleased. "When you run into difficulty- and I'm sure you will- remember me. I will be here to teach you what you need."

And then, without protest, the hooded woman dissolved into falling light. The light disappeared into the edges of the holocron and Kyra was left holding a dark, silent pyramid.

She felt relieved that was over, but also slightly disappointed. She reminded herself what this was and the dangers it represented, and she knew she'd made the right choice. Kyra walked carefully back to the camp. And found the others still fast asleep. She crouched in front of her bag and stuffed the holocron down to the bottom, where they wouldn't see it. Then she crawled back into her bedroll and tried for sleep.

When everyone awoke they felt well-rested, even her. They practiced lightsaber and couffees for a short time, then continued their trek. After some five hours they crested the

tallest ridge, and the sight took Kyra's breath away. Mountains fell downward into another stone forest. Beyond the petrified woods there was another ridge-line, plainly visible from his elevation. And beyond that second ridge, something she'd never seen on this planet. Seen under pale and bright starlight she wasn't even sure what it was, but Cade brought out his binoculars and scanned.

"Well I'll be damned," the man muttered.

"What is it?" asked Eli, looking between him and Khat Lah.

The Yuuzhan Vong was silent. Cade handed him the binoculars and he peered into the distance. "I don't believe it. That's... an actual forest. I see trees with leaves, grasses.... Is that running water?"

"Let me see," Kyra said, and tugged the binoculars until Eli relented.

She held them to her eyes and peered through. Even in cold starlight she could see the deep green of the trees, and she scoured the forest with her eyes until she saw the twinkling trail of a river winding away from them. It seemed to be flowing downhill, and when she shifted the binoculars to the horizon she saw the sight they'd been chasing all along. The great pillar of light that stabbed halfway up the sky fell downward until it disappeared into what seemed like the lip of a volcanic rim. The eruption mound looked like it was all gray rock but it was wreathed in forests on all sides.

"We're almost there," Kyra breathed. "We could get there *today*."

"It is best you not tax yourselves," Khat Lah said carefully. "But yes. We are close."

"All those plants, that water," Eli said, "Is that because of the eruption?"

"The Force is so strong there that life flourishes from barren earth. We should find food there to replenish our supplies, but we must be careful too."

Kyra's joy was tempered with renewed fear. "Those... things from our dreams... will we see them again?"

"Perhaps," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "Perhaps not. The Force will decide for us."

And the Force, Traya had said, could be a cruel master. But Kyra had already been on the way to figuring that out.

“Well,” Cade said softly, “Best get a move on.”

He was right; they’d come this far and had only a short distance to revelation. After a short break to eat and drink from their diminished stores they began their descent toward a lush and living forest.

When Talon’s scout ship reverted to realspace it was just a little bit closer to the galactic disc. As the milky band of stars stretched across her viewport her hands raced across the communications console. They were trembling and she forced herself to take deep calming breaths.

Everything had gone as planned so far. She’d disposed of her guards then they were tired, two heavy blows to the head with a rock. She’d sneaked out of her cave and sulked through the darkness, safely evading the Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa in the canyon floor. Then she’d climbed the sheer rock face until her hands ached and arms burned, but she’d gotten to the top and gotten to her ship. Jariah Syn had surprised her and nearly ruined everything but she’d disposed of him with a lightsaber to the abdomen. She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t think she’d killed him. Strange, she thought distractedly, that she’d made her escape without taking a single life. It would have been easy to do so and she wondered why she hadn’t.

Whatever the reason, it was irrelevant. Talon turned on her communications system and set it to the precise frequency used by the One Sith for absolute emergencies. Whoever had scattered after Lord Nihl’s death would be listening to this. The broken pieces of the Sith would be coordinating, pulling themselves together, and plotting to avenge this latest defeat.

Taking steady breaths, making sure her hands were steady, Talon brought up the frequency and began broadcasting. Bending close to the console she said, “This is Darth Talon, former Hand of Darth Krayt. Please respond.”

She took more breaths and waited. She hadn’t expected a response right away but seconds ticked on. After a long minute passed, she repeated, “This is Darth Talon. To any fellow Sith using this channel, please respond! I have discovered something vital that will allow us the Force again! I have found the key to our victory! Please respond!”

She waited. Another minute went by and still there was no response.

Now she was starting to panic. The One Sith had been broken badly in her absence, worse than she'd ever thought. No one was monitoring this channel. That meant the survivors had to be deep in hiding, unable to even access a communications system.

Or there could be no survivors at all.

Talon raged against the thought. If there were no more Sith she had no more purpose. Before she knew it an angry, wordless shout escaped her lips. Ashamed, she tried to calm herself and repeated her message again. She waited. No response.

She checked her comm and made sure it was transmitting on the proper channel. Its small green light said everything was in order, but there was still no reply. She'd risked everything to sneak onto her ship, escape Rohakalla, and make this broadcast, but there was no one left to listen.

The One Sith were gone. Her people were gone.

Talon stared at the communications console for a long time, eyes focused on that little green light. She'd lost the Force and she'd lost the Sith. She'd lost everything. The realization crushed her so badly she didn't even move. There was no point in moving. There was no point in anything. Since the death of Darth Krayt her life had been crumbling around her. Now, finally, she'd been reduced to nothing.

She wanted nothing more than to drift through black void until she died.

Some time later- she had no idea how much- another console started beeping. Talon picked up her head and saw a proximity alert. Here, in the depths of open space. Her mind, slowed by devastating grief, didn't understand right away.

Then a yellow light on the comm console lit up. Incoming transmission. Numbly she reached for it. She tapped it on and a woman's familiar voice said, "Stand down now, *schutta!* Don't run, don't shoot, and don't you dare send hails to your Sith pals or I will blow you to hot atoms!"

She'd jumped from Rohakalla at random coordinates. There was no way *Mynock* could have found her so soon. Then Talon remembered the tracking device placed on their ship; in

her rush to escape she'd forgotten about something so obvious. Yet even if she'd disabled the thing, it wouldn't have done her a damned bit of good.

It was all so absurd. For the first time in years, maybe since she was a small child, Talon laughed. It was an unnatural wheezing sound that racked her body and she couldn't control it. It lasted less than a minute before dying on its own, and Deliah Blue's voice crackled, "What the hell is wrong with you? Are you standing down or not?"

She was standing down. No shields raised, no weapons hot. It occurred to Talon that she could try tugging the scout ship's control yoke, just to see what the Zeltron would do. Likely she'd fulfill her promise and turn Talon to atoms; the woman had a nasty streak almost as vicious as a Sith's.

It would be so easy to die, and frankly, Talon had nothing better to do. Yet, strangely, she found she didn't want to die. She wasn't sure why. She only knew that the great abyss, without time or the Force, had no appeal to her.

Talon lifted her head and stared at the galactic disc far ahead. A new voice came on the comm, Jao Assam's. "Darth Talon, state your intentions. I won't open fire if I don't have to."

"*You* won't," Deliah groused in the background.

Talon stared ahead. White streaked across black. The comm hummed faintly, waiting for response.

Finally she swallowed and said, as strongly as she could, "You have nothing to fear from me. Nothing."

It was true. Something cold tickled her face. Talon lifted a hand and touched wet skin. Tears ran lines through scarlet and black, gleaming softly.

## Chapter Nineteen

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Ania might not have had mystic Force perception like some of her relatives, but she did know how to read a room, and from the moment she and Azlyn stepped inside *Alliance's* conference chamber she knew this was different from their first sit-down.

Seated at the far end of the conference table, Bey had Anj and Captain Antilles on one side, Senator Derrol on the other. The admiral gestured to the chairs beside Derrol and said, "Thank you for coming on short notice. Please, sit down. We've had a chance to review the information you sent us and it's caused us to reevaluate some of our decisions."

As they sat down, Ania and Azlyn exchanged encouraged looks. Bey clasped hands on the tabletop and continued, "The commencement of the trial is just days away. We fled Bakura because we weren't willing to stand by and watch an innocent being convicted. That still holds true. We have this fleet. That means we have the right and responsibility to use it."

That took Ania and Azlyn both by surprise. The latter asked, "You're planning a military strike on Coruscant?"

"Nothing so reckless. We do, however, intend to make our presence known. I will detach one of our cruisers, the *Mon Elusia*, to Coruscant to observe the trial."

"*Observe* with a warship?" That still sounded fairly reckless to Ania. She liked it.

"I want to demonstrate two things, both to Hogram Chalk and all the citizens of the Federation." Bey held up twinned



thick fingers. "One, we are still a threat. Two, we chose not to be because we respect the rule of law."

"You respect it by dropping a warship over Galactic City," Azlyn said skeptically.

"*Mon Elusia* considers itself part of the Federation navy. We all do. It has every right to be there."

"Hogrum Chalk might disagree."

"And he'll we welcome to discuss it with *Mon Elusia*." Bey's lips parted in a thin smile. "I think *that* will keep him distracted, don't you?"

Ania exhaled. "It would. What if it comes to a battle?"

"If shots are fired, *Mon Elusia* won't be the first to do it. However, we will come prepared." Bey gestured to Anj. "I'm putting Rogue Squadron and the rest of our best pilots aboard. I only pray we won't need them."

Ania glanced at the pilot and saw uncommon severity in the woman's eyes. "Okay," she said, "Another concern. If they put all Coruscant on lockdown it'll be harder to get the empress off-world, though. Wouldn't it?"

"We'll also do everything we can to help with that," said Anj. "Our first priority is to get the empress out. Just like you wanted."

"That's nice, but if you don't mind, I'd like to use my own ship as a backup escape plan." If she got in contact with AG-37 she could probably swing a rendezvous between *Free Agent* and *Mon Elusia* en route to Coruscant.

"You're of course free to," said Bey.

"A best-case scenario sounds like Ganner and the rest grab the empress and get her off the planet while Chalk is distracted by *Mon Elusia*," said Azlyn.

"That's correct, and we have just the thing to secure his attention." The admiral held a hand toward Derrol. "The senator has volunteered to appear at his trial after all."

Eyes went to the Chagrian, who accepted them stoically. "I'll tell Chalk I'd be happy to come down to Coruscant and take part in his trial... so long as we can agree to certain terms first. Over a wide-frequency transmission link."

"You're hoping to call Chalk out publicly," said Azlyn. "That's dangerous. Chalk is smart. He could trap you somehow and make you look like the villain."

"He's welcome to try," Derrol gave a pointy-tooth grin. "We have the truth on our side."

"I respect your ardor... but truth isn't enough with Chalk."

"It will be," said Anj, "when we free the empress. Imagine her and the senator standing side-by-side over Coruscant in full public view. If there's a better way to kill Chalk's prosecution, I can't think of it."

Neither could Ania, but it sounded too good to be true, which meant it probably was. "You have a plan to evac in case things go bad, right?"

"*Mon Elusia* will appear over Coruscant alone, but that doesn't mean it won't have backup," said Derrol. "Trust us, Captain Solo. Trust *me*. I have no intention of going on a suicide mission."

"We've agreed to take care of our part," Anj said encouragingly. "That means you have to take care of yours."

More accurately, Ania though, her mother would do her part. Ania was just a backup ride home.

"We understand," Azlyn said, and passed Ania a glance that said *I'm with you*. "First things first. We get the empress. Everything else follows from that."

When Porat Derrol returned to their quarters, a small and simple cabin in *Alliance's* habitat deck, he let the door close behind him before exhaling deeply. Saara came up to him and took both his hands in hers.

"Is it done?" she asked.

"It is. I'll be going aboard *Mon Elusia*. Solo and Rae will insert themselves on Coruscant before the trial, in case they need help extracting the empress."

"That's good. Every plan needs a backup."

"It will be dangerous. I'm sure we'll be encircled as soon as we enter Coruscant orbit."

"Chalk won't risk firing on you, not if it makes him look like an aggressor. He'll at least hear you out when you appear," she said firmly. "Chalk's entire strategy so far has been to paint you and Stazi as hostile forces, bent on destroying the Federation. He's forcing the other Alliance senators to choose between him and you, and he's made a lot of progress in painting you as a villain."

"You sound like you know how he operated," Derrol smiled lightly.

"I am," she said. Here, with Derrol and no one else, she didn't have to pretend to be a naïve young refugee. She was the daughter of a Sith, and a master manipulator at that. "Chalk is ruthless and he trades in lies. He knows if a lie is flimsy it has to be kept in the dark, where it can't be seen."

"Like the not-so-dead empress."

"Yes. And if a lie is strong enough, he can parade it proudly in front of a jury trial. You can break his lies, Porat. He knows it, which means you'll have the upper hand."

"I hope you're right," he said gravely.

It had been Porat's idea to go with *Mon Elusia* and offer himself as bait. She knew her husband felt guilty to be free when three friends were on trial for their lives, but it wasn't just guilt that was driving him back into Chalk's hands. It was the kind of bravery Saara's father could have never understood. Like the other Sith, he'd let his Force powers become blinders that cut off from so much of life.

Porat removed his hand from hers and moved it to cup her cheek. "What about you?" he asked. "We know the empress captured Darth Havok. He's probably told her about you."

"I'm not sure. Havok dealt in lies even better than Chalk. And even if he did tell her, what proof does she have? My past is a blank before I met you. I made sure of that. If they investigate, they'll find nothing."

"I hope you're right. I still see a little suspicion in Azlyn Rae's eyes."

"I saw that too. You said she was one of the ones who interrogated you in your office."

"They were asking about the attack on Bavinyar. Given the rumors going around about me, I wasn't surprised when they came in. The questioning was more aggressive than I'd expected, though."

"Let Rae keep investigating. Let the empress interrogate us. We haven't done anything we're being accused of." She squeezed his hand. "Our actions can speak for themselves. We're not traitors."

Porat's smile was wry and wordless. If either of them was a traitor she was, but not the kind the empress might imagine.

His hand left her face and fell to his side. "I won't transfer to *Mon Elusia* for two days yet, but I should get ready."

She took the hand. "We'll get ready, you mean."

"Saarai—"

She shook her head firmly. "Where you go, I go, Porat. We agreed on this a long time ago." They'd agreed the day she'd told him what she really was and been shocked by his acceptance.

"I know better than to argue with you," he acquiesced. "All right. We'll go together. And if something happens..."

Saarai released his hand and pressed a finger to his lips. "Whatever it is, we'll be together."

It was a simple fact. Alone, it couldn't change the future awaiting them, but it gave her greater strength than her father's dark, dangerous, draining Force ever had.

As her captivity drew on, day after empty day, Marasiah began to admit that uncle had been right about a few things. For one, her anger ebbed and she began to see things more clearly. She understood what Hogram had done, why he'd done it, and why she should have seen it coming. Grief had clouded her judgment there, as he'd said.

As she reflected on things, she rolled conversations back in her mind. She found herself facing new questions that had never occurred to her before, and in the silence of her prison they nagged her for answers.

When Hogram visited her next, she restrained the urge to come out and ask them. As politely as she could manage, she sat down in the same chair she'd sat in before and talked with her uncle across the low table.

"I'm not concerned about the trial itself," he told her. "I already know the outcome."

"I thought you were leaving the decision to the magistrates." She didn't bother to conceal her bitterness.

"The magistrates will decide based on evidence, and the evidence is conclusive."

"And false."

He ignored her. "History will not hinge on the trial. History will hinge on the way the Alliance partisans react, both in the senate and the military."

"You're a fool if you think you can unify the government this way. They'll never stand by and watch your martyr their heroes."

Hogrum raised his one brow. "Last time you counseled me to imprison them, not kill them. I'm strongly considering it."

"You'll still make the Alliance people furious. They'll never trust you, ever."

"They trusted you, to a point. They even trusted your father."

Mention of him made her heart smolder. "You are *not* my father."

"Yes, and I'm glad of it. Your father could have been a good leader, but his rage and ego destroyed him. Grief and naivety were your downfall. I won't be prey to any of that."

She sniffed, "If I'm such a failure, why are you still asking my advice?"

"Because for all your faults, Sia, I respect you." The honesty in his voice was more painful than any lie. "I believe most beings are more pragmatic than they appear, especially politicians. They joined with your father against the threat of the Sith. They started breaking against you because there was no such threat."

"The Sith never went away. They *killed* Antares."

"Those were not just Sith. Those were schemers lashing out desperately after they'd lost the Force, and they were defeated because they refused to adapt to this new galaxy."

She sighed, unwilling to argue the point. "What kind of threat do you think will bind Brighton and the rest to you? Don't tell me you're going to resurrect the Vong as an enemy. The Sith already did that."

"You've said yourself that beings are tired of war. Everyone is afraid of another one. I imagine that's the only reason Admiral Bey hasn't played his well-armed hand yet. That's doubly true for the politicians. They want peace and order and they want to congratulate themselves for holding true to Alliance values. If I can give them all that, I can keep them on my side."

His voice was slightly distant; he was getting lost in his own thoughts. Softly Marasiah asked, "What are you planning, Uncle?"

His one eyes darted up to her and his face tightened. "I've given them their enemy. All they have to do is join me in condemnation. The trial is their chance to do that."

"They'll never accept what you're doing to Stazi. Never."

"I believe they will." His expression softened. "I remember something your mother told me once, a very long time ago. She said the difference between the Empire and the Alliance-between any monarchy and any democracy- is that in the former, the leader determines everything. In the latter, every man can be replaced, so long as the ideals remain."

"I still don't understand what you're saying."

"You will, in time." He rose from his seat. "I'll explain everything later. Once it's been accomplished."

He started for the door. Until now Marasiah had kept her mix of curiosity and anger bottled tight, but it came out now. She rose to her feet and snapped at his back, "If you're coming back to brag don't bother. I won't listen next time."

He stopped and looked at her. "I realize it's a terrible pun, Sia, but you are a captive audience."

"You come here and pretend to care about me, and then you lie to me. I am *sick* of it."

"I don't lie. I'm more honest with you than anyone."

The disgusting part was, that was probably true. Marasiah sneered, "You lie to me. Even a minute ago, you lied."

"No. I'm just holding the truth close... for now."

"Then tell me the truth. What do you have planned?"

He stared at her with that half-human stare, and after a long moment he muttered, "Goodbye, Sia," and turned for the door.

She should have let him go, but the bottled-up feelings were breaking free. She shouted, "You've been lying to me all this time! I know it!"

He stopped again. "Don't embarrass yourself, Sia."

"I *remember*, Uncle." She bounced a finger against her skull. "I remember what you've said to me. About how you let things get too far out of hand, and how you regret it."

He twisted his head to watch her, metal profile showing only one red glowing eye. "I regret many things."

"First I thought you regretted letting things get so far with *me*. But you talked about how the Force ruined your

judgment, and how you had to break free to do what had to be done.” She dared two steps closer. “You weren’t talking about now. Now the Force rejected *you*. When did you reject the Force?”

He stared at her with that one red eye, scarred lips pressed tight, saying nothing. But he didn’t move for the door.

Something in that inhuman face made her fear, and her voice dropped to a hush. “What did you do? I’ve spent days trying to think of it... but I couldn’t think of what you meant.”

He stared for another long moment, then fully turned away. “We have nothing to discuss. Goodbye, Sia.”

His black cape flared behind him as he started for the door. Marasiah shouted, “I knew it! You’re a liar! Every single thing you tell me is a lie!” The black portal slid open before him. She took another two steps and screamed, “Mother would be *disgusted* by you!”

Marasiah expected that to get to him. She hadn’t expected him to whirl and stalk back to her. He was upon her in a second and his face was twisted with anger she’d never seen before.

“Do you want the truth, Sia? Do you *really* want to know?”

Her own anger was just as strong, and she snarled, “Tell me. Give me the truth, for *once* in your life.”

“Very well.” He snorted in her face. “Do you remember when you were ambushed while meeting the Jedi on Agamar?”

“Of course. I was captured there, and tortured by Havok.”

“You never found out who betrayed you.”

It was a simple statement of fact, innocuous out of context, but its suggestion made her jaw drop.

“You?” she gasped. “You betrayed us to the Sith?”

“I betrayed no one to *them*. My contact with Grand Admiral Veed. I fed him information for over a year before the war’s end.”

The shock was so great she momentarily forget her anger. “But *why*? How could you betray me-”

“I never betrayed you. Even now I’m doing everything I can to protect you.”

“This isn’t protecting.” She waved both hands at the bright

walls of her cage. "And Agamar! At Agamar you betrayed me to the *Sith*!"

"You were never supposed to be there. At the last minute you volunteered to go with your father. I tried to talk you out of it."

He had. She remembered that conversation; only in memory did she realize how insistent he'd been, and how disappointed when she'd refused to heed his warning.

"You betrayed my father," she croaked. "Why?"

"I believe in your father once. *Elliah* believed in him. She gave him everything, even foreswore our home in Hapes. Because she *loved* him. She loved him and he let her die."

Marasiah trembled. "That's not true. Father did everything he could--"

"Niin loved your mother. Did you know that?"

"He... At his interrogation, he said something... I thought it was a lie."

"We all knew it. And we all looked the other way, because Niin was a trusted Knight who'd sworn his vows. And because he was Roan's friend." Hogrum sneered. "The Force twisted Niin's love to savage hate. Your father should have seen it coming- Niin was *his* Knight- but he didn't, just like he should have seen Maladi's and Calixte's schemes."

"So you tried to kill Father, for *Mother's* sake?" The viciousness of it was hitting her in full. Shock was receding, anger coming back.

"For *Elliah's* sake. For *all* our sakes. Roan was a *bad* leader. His pride and his anger led him to bad decisions, time and again. For *your* sake most of all Sia, he had to be destroyed."

She remembered her father's awful final moments; she remembered watching wounded from across the room as Antares thrust his white saber-blade through his emperor's chest. She remembered the way her father's fierce expression lapsed to the peacefulness of death, and how Antares' eyes had gone empty with instant grief for what he'd done.

She'd told Antares over and over it was necessary, that he was a good man and a great Knight. That she forgave him.

As she looked up at her uncle, Marasiah knew she'd never forgive him.



"My judgement was clouded for years and years," he said in a low growl. "By the Force. By the vow I gave your father. But I broke free in the end, and I did what had to be done. When Maladi offered your father a virus that could wipe out all life on Coruscant, I saw the hunger in his eye, and I saw it war with the cloak of nobility he wrapped himself inside. I encouraged him, you see. I urged him on, telling him that Maladi's genocidal weapon was the only way to win the war."

"But why?"

"Because I knew someone would put him down like he deserved." Coolly Hogrum said, "I thought Sinde would be the one to have the strength, actually. Antares surprised me. He was a better man than I'd thought."

It was that, of all things, that made her finally snap. When facing a captive Darth Havok, she'd barely been able to restrain her rage against the man who'd killed her mother. Against her father's killer- his *real* killer- she didn't even try.

In her anger she struck fast and hard, but she was sloppy. She lashed for his neck but he twisted his body away so her hand cracked hard into the metal casing of his bio-suit. As she snapped back his arm came up, slapping hers back and leaving her open for a metal-cased elbow to the face. Pain blossomed and suddenly she was on the ground, groping across smooth tiles for the black leather of Hogrum's boot. She grabbed it with both hands and tugged savagely, but his other foot swung and took her in the stomach.

Marasiah retched and curled into a fetal position. Blood from her cheek smeared a red arc over the white floor. When she forced her eyes open she stared up at her uncle, now well out of reach.

"I have a great deal to do," he said gruffly. "But I'll be back. In time."

"I'll kill you," she choked, and meant it.

He didn't flinch, just looked down on her coolly and said, "Goodbye, Sia."

For years she'd held herself against all the rage and spite that had ruined her father. She'd sworn never to take his path, but that was because she'd had power and responsibility and the Force, and the hinge of history turned on her self-control.

She had nothing now and she was nothing. She was free to act her deepest desire.

Marasiah found a last spurt of rage and reared to her feet. Screaming primal anger, arms outstretched and hands like claws, she lunged for her uncle. He didn't move and didn't flinch, but a steel-skeleton security droid appeared in the door behind him. When Marasiah was just inches from her uncle, the droid's wrist-mounted blaster released a bolt of blue stun energy. It took her dead in the chest and dropped her. She was numb before she hit the hard tile and darkness filled her vision, erasing her bright cage and, for a while, the pain of revelation.

## Chapter Twenty

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The forest sang with life. Just being here was intoxicating and a staggering change from the days they'd spent wandering across barren wastes, ancient ruins, and petrified woods. Leaf-dense branches and wide-frond palms spread over their heads and ferns brushed their legs as they moved toward the bright light flickering through distant trees. When they trod on raw earth it was brown and soft, and when they found streams they stopped to replenish their water supplies.

"I gotta admit," Cade said as he filled his canteen, "This reminds me of Zonama Sekot."

Khat Lah nodded agreement, but Kyra knew it was more than that. "I saw animals too. Insects and birds in the trees. I saw a flock of something... it looked like the blue-winged nreki they have on Svivren."

"Funny," Eli muttered, "I thought I saw hynex running through the bush. It's a small mammal... they have them on Corellia."

"This place is populating itself with things from our memories, isn't it?" she asked Khat Lah.

"Yes, but no. This forest has sprung to life on its own. As I said, the Force is that strong here. These trees and ferns... I am not an expert on plants, but I imagine they are from a hundred different worlds all across the galaxy."

"Still," said Cade, "Looks like some of us is coming out in our surroundings again."

"Yes," the Yuuzhan Vong said, "And this is why we must be careful."

He was right, but this couldn't have felt more different from the stone forest. The air here was damp and fragrant, and it sounded of water and birdsong. Kyra felt safe here, not menaced by shadows. But when she glanced at Eli he still looked wary.

"See anything?" she asked as they resumed their trek toward the light.

"I see lots of things," the young man muttered. "Trees. Bushes. Hynexes."

"But those Duros?"

"No... What about your..."

"Jeodu," she said. "Nothing."

"Good," he muttered.

She didn't ask him exactly what those Duros were and how they figured into the nightmares that had racked him for days. She knew he wasn't ready to share. She wasn't ether, so they kept walking. Along the way Khat Lah recommended fruit that was safe to pick from trees. Kyra sampled one; after more than a week of dried foodstuffs its wet tang was glorious. All four of them ate and packed their bags with fresh fruit. Birds sang in the branches and no nightmares emerged from the woods. Feeling refreshed and strong and even optimistic, they marched toward their journey's goal.

To get there they needed to mount one last slope. The forest fell away to scrub and the scrub to bare rock. The ascent was short but steep, and they had to hunch on all fours, packs heavy on their backs, and pull themselves up. Khat Lah was the first to reach the crest, followed by Cade. Kyra lagged further behind and as she got close a chunk of rock fell out under her hand and she started to slide back. Eli, just ahead of her, saw and reached out with one hand. He was too far away to grab her with it, but his invisible Force-grip stopped her fall before it started, allowing her to regain her hold.

"Thank you," she called up to him.

Eli merely nodded and continued climbing. He joined Cade and Khat Lah at the crest a minute later, and Kyra was right behind him.

They stood on top of a roughly circular rim. Land sloped down on all sides toward a single point. Light eruption from

a gash in the stone. It was blindingly bright; Kyra had to peer between two fingers as she held her hand in front of her face. She felt it in the Force too; all that raw and inchoate power that lingered in the air felt stronger than ever. Before she'd felt like she was submerged underwater; now she felt encased in solid ferrocrete. It was impossible to move and difficult to even breathe.

Despite the brilliant eruption, the light made no sound at all, which only made it more disturbing. She heard Eli perfectly as he whispered, "What now?"

"The Force is not concentrated so strongly anywhere in the universe," said Khat Lah. "It is a phase shift, a bridge between our plane of the universe and the higher, noncorporeal one on which the Whills exist."

"So what are we here for?" asked Cade. "You want us to climb a ladder to heaven?"

"Not us," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "The eruption is so powerful matter itself dissolves in its light. Only those most powerful in the Force can even temporarily withstand it."

Cade's eyes went wide. "Stang, is that it? *That's* what you brought me here for? You want me to touch that thing, and what, talk to your gods for you?" His lip curled in a snarl. "What, you never tried that before? You and your Vong buddies?"

"Several tried," Khat Lah's voice scraped. "They could not withstand it."

"You mean they died?" asked Eli.

The Yuuzhan Vong simply nodded.

"Dammit," Cade breathed. "Damn it and damn *you*, Khat Lah. You could have at least told me before you dragged me across the entire karking galaxy to see this... this *thing*."

"You could not understand it without seeing it, without feeling it as you do now."

"I still don't understand it."

"If any living being in this galaxy can cross that bridge it is *you*. Your Skywalker blood- the legacy of the Chosen One-protected you from Maladi's virus-"

"Which is something that witch cooked up in a lab. This is..." He squinted at the light. "I don't even *know* what this is."

“There is only one way to learn.”

“And you really think this thing can re-establish the Force somehow? Undo all the damage Maladi did?”

“If that can happen anyplace in the galaxy, it is here. And if any Jedi can do it, it is you.” Khat Lah placed a hand on his arm. “I awakened to the Force for reasons I still don’t understand, but your grandmother was a part of it. In her dying moments Jade Skywalker was an eruption too, and I touched the Force only after being bathed in her power. That power lives in you, I can feel it. No one else can do this but you.”

Cade stared at the light through narrowed eyes. Kyra could feel his conflict in the Force, muted as it was by the deafening strength of the eruption. For a moment he seemed ready to walk away, but then he snorted, “Might as well give it a try. But I ain’t being stupid about this.”

Cade dropped his bag. He stuck his lightsaber inside and took out a small spool of fibercable. He hooked on end to his belt and handed the spool itself to Khat Lah. “If I get in trouble, hit the auto-retract button and drag me the hell out. Don’t you dare get close.”

“Thank you, Jedi Skywalker.”

“Don’t mention it,” Cade grunted. “Seriously.”

He tugged the hook in his belt to make sure the cable was attached, then looked to Eli and Kyra. His determined gaze passed over them both, maybe for the last time. Then, very carefully, with the fibercable trailing behind him, Cade began to move down the slope and into the light.

He’d already fulfilled his destiny once and lived to tell about it. Maybe he could do it again.

That was the thought that kept ringing in Cade’s head as he approached the light. He’d run from his fated battle with Krayt for years but faced it in the end. This was different. There would be no clash of lightsabers against the backdrop of a burning world. There wouldn’t even be a battle. There would only be revelation, and he’d either withstand it or he wouldn’t.

He’d gone inside the Tho Yor on Tython and come back in one piece. That was cause for confidence, he hoped.

The light was so bright Cade had to close his eyes and cover his face with one hand. It was so strong but so *silent*; that felt wrong somehow. He staggered ahead as best he could on the uneven rock, listening to pebbles slip beneath his boots. Every few steps he'd tug the fibercord hooked to his belt, just to make sure it was attached.

Because he was blinded he didn't know when he physically reached the light. He didn't know if he even did. He simply felt the overwhelming Force energy surrounded and envelop him.

He expected some free-falling through trackless space, like when he'd been sucked into the Tho Yor. Instead the light flashed and faded, and Cade found himself standing in a place he knew. Walls slanted high above great four-sided chamber, rising to a peak that matched the shape of the Jedi Temple's pyramid. This was the greatest convocation hall at the Ossus academy, the place where he'd watched his father address the assembled Jedi at times momentous and dire. This place had been destroyed by Sith turbolaser fire years ago, but Cade understood instinctively that this setting was not physical. Rather, it was something conjured by his mind, an ordering that allowed some sense of the plane in which he'd found himself.

He stood on the podium at the chamber's center. Rows of benches striated outward in all four directions. Above, the pyramid peaked and a soft light glowed. Suddenly Cade realized he was not alone. He looked around the imagined scene and saw shadows, formless, filling the benches, observing him without touching. Certainty came that if they wanted to rush him they'd take him and dissolve him and there'd be nothing left but light. Theirs was an ancient, primal power beyond his reckoning.

As he'd done in the Tho Yor, Cade spoke without speaking. *Who are you? Are you the Whills?*

The shapeless formless things stayed in their seats and he sensed he was being scrutinized. A mind touched his and said, *You are a small thing and you do not belong here.* He had the sense it was talking like an adult would to an infant.

*You won't get any argument from me,* Cade replied.

*Why are you here?*

He couldn't tell if it came from the same source or different one. He wasn't sure if there *were* different minds around him, or countless individuals subsumed into one. Something about this massive audience didn't feel quite whole; rather, it he got the feeling that they were divided in two, though neither half seemed more friendly than the other.

*The Force gone from the galaxy, every place but this world,* he said. *I'm trying to get it back.*

*The Force exists everywhere. It touches all living things.*

*Yeah, but nobody can touch it. Not anymore.*

*You can touch it.*

*Well, apparently I'm special. I've got an ancestor called Anakin Skywalker. They said he was the Chosen One, that the Force created him- or the Whills created him. Was that you?*

The response took a timeless forever. Then one of them said, *As we thought. We sensed the Chosen One in you.*

*Then was it you? Did you make Anakin Skywalker? Did you make me?*

Another long wait, and then, *Yes.*

*Why did you create the Chosen One?*

*Because it was necessary. The Force had been damaged and it needed to be repaired.*

*Couldn't you do it yourselves? You're powerful enough.*

*You don't understand.*

*Then help me understand. I want to understand what I am, and I want to get the Force back.*

*You cannot understand. It would destroy you.*

Cade remembered the onslaught of knowledge in the Tho Yor and how it had nearly torn him apart. He braced himself for more. *Show me a little. Please.*

Another long wait. And then the Whills said, *Hold fast, and try.*

And knowledge came to him, like water pouring from the pyramid peak above. Yet it wasn't like the torrent that had swept him away in the Tho Yor; he felt like he was an empty vessel being poured full to overflow. Suddenly he understood things; they seemed as natural as comprehensible as his name. He understood that this world had attained a collective consciousness hundreds of millions of years ago,



when galactic civilization had been relatively young. For millions of years more it had survived, growing more and more powerful in the Force, drawing the lives on its surface closer and closer until they'd become almost whole, a single consciousness spread across a billion physical bodies. It was like a Jedi mind meld but so much more, and it touched every living thing, sentient and not. Cade realized the Force had been universal and pure here. It hadn't filtered itself through midi-chlorians; those strange microbes did not exist because there was no need for them. Every life was in turn with the Living Force, a part of its endless movement, and through the Living Force it connected to that mysterious wellspring Jedi called the Cosmic Force.

And he understood this world was not alone. Many other planets- hundreds, thousands- had also attained self-awareness through the Force. And he understood, with sickening certainty, that they did not live in primal paradise. The rules of survival applied for living worlds as they did for beasts. The great worlds warred on each other. They used unimaginable weapons to wage their cosmic conflict, devastating entire swathes of the galaxy and stripping them of even the most basic life. As the wars raged over eons the living planets separated themselves into two sides, equal yet opposite, each determined to eclipse the other.

*In your terms*, a Whill told him, *A light side, and a dark side.*

And suddenly the seeming division in the Whills made sense. Yet even as he struggled to with the ramifications, knowledge keep pouring into him. The empyrean wars ended with unimaginable devastation. Most of the living worlds destroyed each other but a few on either side remained. This planet- one on the light side- had attained a greater understanding of the Force. Through struggle and age and wisdom Cade's mind could never comprehend, the living worlds had discovered the way to voluntarily shed their material forms. Every body acting as one mind, all its life forms had transcended. Every living planet, light and dark, had repeated this, and when the process was done the galaxy was a wracked and barren place, yet still fecund in the Living Force.

But those ancient, incomprehensible minds had joined the Cosmic Force. They're brought themselves to the higher plane and colored it with their awareness. As they were split into two warring sides, so was the power of the Cosmic Force drawn across two equal and opposite halves, light and dark. In splitting the Cosmic Force these energies flowed back into the Living Force, coloring it as well, drawing all who touched it toward opposing poles.

*That is the way of the Force, the Whills told him. Everything is part of everything else. They rise and fall together and everything that rises must converge.*

Millions of years passed. Life grew again and every living thing touched the Force as naturally as breathing. Some worlds attained consciousness. Some few attained perfect oneness with the Force and ascended. Civilizations rose and fell. Species flourished and died. All the while the two great and ancient forces, light and dark, subtly pulled beings toward either pole, having been embedded in the nature of the Cosmic Force.

And then, finally, things changed.

*You call them Celestials, a Whill said, but that is only a name. They were not even one people. They were merely the last cycle of civilization to transcend.*

When the Celestials left this plane of existence to join the Cosmic Force there was a schism. The Celestials had warred among themselves, destroying entire suns and star systems. Worse still, their powerful tools had been usurped by a mortal servant race, and those servants had fully embraced the Force's dark side to become agents of horror.

Cade figured out that one on his own: *The Rakata*.

Fearful of what the Rakata might do and jealous of their transcendent knowledge, the Celestials did something never attempted on so large a scale. As they became Whills and gained the power to join the Cosmic Force they stole the Living Force from beings still mortal. They took it with them, siphoning it away and locking it on the higher plane, not all at once but gradually over centuries. But the Celestials were not totally unmerciful. Before ascending they seeded the galaxy with pieces of their mortal bodies that were still attuned the Force. These pieces bound themselves to the very

genes of the species that were then rising to travel the stars. Only individuals lucky to have enough of these pieces ever felt the Force as more than a trickle of its true power, as influenced by the Celestials now joined with the Cosmic Force.

*Midi-chlorians*, Cade realized.

Only a tiny few had enough midi-chlorians to attune with the Living Force, and even they couldn't touch it as naturally as those before. The Cosmic Force was forever beyond them, and with this inhibition no planets could ever attain the union required to reach consciousness. That was the point; the Living Force had been weakened and neutered so it could no longer be abused.

The Celestials had been from this galaxy alone, and as they passed into the Cosmic Force their reach was still limited by space and time. They'd passed pieces of themselves as midi-chlorians to act as the Force's sole conduit, but to this galaxy alone. That was why Zonama Sekot, that seed of far-off Yuuzhan'tar, had been alone in awakening and why the Yuuzhan Vong, in their primordial state, had never needed midi-chlorians at all.

*We did it to protect you from your own powers*, the Whills said. *Untrained hands have wrought too much destruction with the Force.*

Cade wanted to argue- even though it might have been true- but another downpour of knowledge fell. He started to overflow again; things that had seemed so certain a moment ago were spilling out of his mind. He learned- relearned- that three Celestials had disagreed with their kind and instead of becoming Whills they'd stayed behind, nudging mortal affairs in small ways as they passed millennia on the enclosed corpse of an ascended world called Mortis. They'd kept balance until Anakin Skywalker watched them die.

*What was he?* Cade asked frantically. *What was the Chosen One? What am I?*

*Mortal beings should not have been able to breach their plane and wound the Cosmic Force, but some did.*

Cade knew it and felt it: the pain inflicted on the Force- on the Whills themselves- by three determined Sith Lords. In concentrating the dark side in just two bodies, master and

apprentice, the last Banite Sith had indeed attained power inconceivable.

First Darth Acheron, through willpower and blood sacrifice, had reached beyond the Living Force to tear a hole in the Cosmic. Two generations later, Darth Plagueis and Darth Sidious had managed to fill that hole with their dark will, overcoming even the Whills who kept in timeless balance between dark and light. Plagueis and Sidious succeeded in tipping the Cosmic Force toward darkness, a change that flowed into the Living Force and bent the galaxy to nearly two centuries of darkness and strife.

As the wound had been inflicted by mortal hands, the Whills were unable to heal that damage. Sealed fully inside the Cosmic Force as they were, their ability to affect the Living was limited, and they could do nothing to repair the great damage Plagueis and Sidious had made. Instead they did the best they could.

The powers of light and darkness had conjoined for a single purpose, a truce in a timeless war. They'd influenced the midi-chlorians to spark a single life inside a slave woman on Tatooine. And that timeless spark, that pure connection to the Cosmic Force and the plane of the Whills, had been passed down for one hundred and eighty years to the Chosen One's descendants.

*But why? Cade begged. Why create one life? What was Anakin supposed to do?*

*He was a bridge between the Living Force and the Cosmic, meant to heal the damage the Sith had made because we could not. He was made to act his will upon the Force, and to act out the will of the Force.*

*Will of the Force? You mean your will, right?*

*Our will infuses the Cosmic Force. Yet there is a level beyond that, which even we cannot touch. That exists beyond light and dark, good and evil, being and nonbeing. We are as separate from that plane as you are from us.*

*And what am I supposed to do?*

After a long-seeming pause they said, *Whatever you will, Skywalker.*

*I came here to get the damn Force back. The Celestials never meant to take it away, just... withhold it, so we can't*

*damage ourselves. How can the Force connect with our midi-chlorians again?*

The Whills were silent. Cade sensed them still, swarming him on all sides without touching him, observing, judging. There was power all around him, in the Whills and the spaces between them, the power of a plane that defied all comprehension.

And behind the immense power of the Cosmic Force he sensed something else too: the spring from which the Whills drew power from. Still feeling drenched from that downpour of knowledge, Cade looked up to the peak of the imagined gathering hall. The light above him was brighter than ever, stronger than ever, and he realized now this was not only light but a gateway. Greater than anything, beyond everything, this new layer to the Force was above him, he could feel it, and if he went through the gateway could do anything.

That was when Cade started to wonder whether the Whills, in creating a Skywalker, hadn't built more than even they had imagined. They were already a bridge between the Living Force and the Cosmic Force; he might even be able to stretch beyond that.

They wanted him to act out his will? He could damn well try. He hadn't come this far for a lecture.

Cade extended his awareness into the Whills and past them to the power that lay beyond. With a hand that was not a hand he stretched upward, toward a ceiling that was a gateway. With pure singular intent he grabbed the portal and felt the power course through him. He felt the panic of the Whills and their attempts to stop him. He didn't care. He grasped hold of something older than time and deeper than knowing, and in a timeless instant he was straddling three planes in the Force. Then Cade pulled from both ends, bridging them all together.

As he built the bridge he knew what it would do, and what it would cost. He struggled to weigh one against the other—there was still so much more he wanted to *do* with his life—and in that hesitation the Whills seized him. They grabbed him with incorporeal hands and pulled him apart, straining, breaking the bridge and breaking Cade, but for a moment the

power of the purest Force still surged through it all, binding everything into a unified whole.

Then the moment was over and everything broke. The bridge was shattered, Cade was shattered, and so was every world he ever knew.

Darth Talon felt nothing as hyperspace disappeared and Rohakalla appeared before them as a gleaming blue-white crescent. The world and its strange, ancient secrets promised salvation for some, but not for her.

When Jao Assam had boarded her ship he'd placed her in the co-pilot's seat and stun-cuffed her hands behind the chair back. She hadn't resisted all. She rolled her head slightly to watch the Imperial Knight as he gripped the throttle and began acceleration toward the planet. As they moved he leaned forward and craned his neck to look outside the cockpit.

Talon looked outside too and spotted *Mynock's* glowing thruster off their starboard flank. It was, she supposed, preferable to be held captive by Assam than Deliah Blue. If they returned to the planet and learned that Jariah Syn had died of his injuries, well, Talon doubted she'd escape vengeance. Dying by someone else's hand, she discovered, bothered her less than dying by her own. It was a strange realization; as One Sith she'd been told since childhood that she might one day have to surrender her life. Back then, of course, she'd had a purpose. She'd had faith.

Assam muttered, "Let's get down there and see if they've cleaned up the mess you've made."

Talon didn't react. She simply stared ahead at Rohakalla as the planet, still mostly draped in night, grew to fill half their viewport. Just a few minutes now, and then she'd learn what kind of fate she'd get.

Suddenly, light appeared from the surface of the planet. It started as a flare dotting the black nightside face, wavered for a few seconds, then grew brighter.

"What the hells-" Assam muttered. He looked at Talon, as though for explanation. She gave the tiniest shrug.

He reached across her to turn the comm system to broadcast. "Deliah, did you see that? Deliah?"

Talon waited for him to remember the radiation that crippled transmission in this system. Eventually Jao groaned frustration, gripped the throttle tight, and plunged them forward with increased speed.

His eyelids fluttered shut, then opened slowly. It took effort to hold them apart. Bright light shone from behind him and glared on the backs of his hands, the shoulders of his vacuum suit. Far beyond them: the curve of a green-brown planet and the darkness of star-speckled space.

His body twisted around of its own volition. The bright light hurt his eyes and he raised a hand to block it. There was a single starship ahead of him, long-bodied, rugged. He tried to feel the minds inside. They weren't Jedi, weren't Sith. They were strangers who meant nothing to him.

The ship grew larger. They were reeling him in with a tractor beam. Quiet sadness filled him as he realized he was going to live.

The ship pulled him closer, filling his vision. An airlock portal opened and he was pulled into it. There was no point in resisting and he didn't have the strength anyway. He fell into the airlock vestibule and the artificial gravity grabbed him, throwing him roughly to the ground. His vac suit cushioned the fall but his limbs had gone stiff from hours floating in space, and oxygen deprivation blurred his mind. He couldn't find the strength to stand as the airlock sealed and the chamber nosily repressurized.

Then the second door opened, and a single being marched into the airlock. The first thing he saw was a three-clawed metal foot, followed by a brown leather boot. Weakly, he lifted his head and saw a tall broad Feeorin glaring down at him with one vicious eye; a pale X-shaped scar slashed out the other.

*(That was when Jariah realized he was seeing through Cade's eyes. He didn't know how or why. He remembered being stabbed by Talon and he remembered the world fading to black while Lowbacca unleashed a deafening howl. He'd heard about your life flashing before your eyes, but somebody else's life? Never.)*

The Feeorin roughly grabbed him by the collar of his suit. With the other hand he released the pressure clamps on the helmet and twisted the bubble off his head. Pure air was glorious and he gasped it in like a man saved from drowning.

The Feeorin dragged him out of the vestibule and into the chamber beyond. He was suddenly surrounded by men and women of different species wearing rugged clothes. Their eyes were predatory, their smiles leering. Many of them, he noticed even in his daze, bore the same tattoo mark: a red X-shape with curved hooks on all four ends.

*(Maybe this wasn't dying, Jariah thought. Maybe the Kwa were healing him and this was some weird side-effect of their Force magic. Or maybe he this was just some really vivid fever-dream as his body mended itself together.)*

"What the kark is that?" a nearby Duros asked. "Some whelp?"

"A Jedi whelp, maybe." The Feeorin held him up with one and looked him up and down, clearly disappointed. "What happened to you, boy? Tried to run when the Imps were killing all your friends?"

His words bring back every awful memory of the escape from Ossus. Summoning the dark power inside him to save Master Sazen. Feeling his father die. Jumping into a Twintail fighter and leaping out into space, blowing up TIE fighter after TIE fighter in a blaze of mindless vengeance.

Memory brought back anger. He lashed out and landed a strong punch of the Feeorin's face, right where his nose should have been.

He might as well have puffed air in his face. The Feeorin was unhurt but angry, and lifting him higher the pirate barked, "So that's how it's going to be, is it? *Sleemo* Jedi! Let's find out how well you breathe in vacuum!"

The Feeorin started toward the airlock, carrying his captive with him. Other marauders gathered close to leer and gawk but one figure dashed right up to his captain. It was a lean dark boy, maybe his own age, with a red-X tattoo on his shoulder and tangled dreadlocks framing his face.

*(Jariah couldn't believe he'd ever looked that young.)*

"He's not Jedi, Captain Rav, sir," The boy patted his jumpsuit up and down. "Look! No lightsaber!"



With a growl the Feeorin dropped him hard on the deck. The pirate's anger smoldered as he swiveled to the boy. "Why stretch your neck out for the likes of this one? He's no blood to you, Syn, and it was a Jedi who killed your Da."

The boy wasn't cowed by the hulking figure. "He might be a scavenger brother to *us*, Captain, off some other ship! Could be he's already dirtside on Ossus. Could be he knows a way around them Jedi traps! We toss him out, we never find out what he knows!"

*(Jariah really hadn't been scared by Rav. Maybe he'd still trusted the old sarlacc, the same way he'd trusted his father, not realizing until too late that neither man deserved his affection. Or maybe he'd just been stupidly brave back then.)*

He sees his opportunity. Without hesitation or regret he takes it and says, "That's the way of it, Captain. My former boss brought us in a little early for the pickings. Imperials shot us down." He looks up and sees Rav's face softened slightly in thought and goes on. Lies come with surprising ease. "We'd traded with Jedi before and knew where they put their booby traps. But the maps are in my head. Kill me and that map is gone."

Rav's face twisted in a smile. He was more amused than convinced, but it was enough to buy a little more life. Rav bent over and told him, "*Eniki*, I'm willing to wait and see." Then he turned to the boy who'd saved him. "*Chess ko myo bukee*- if there's no plunder, or if any of us dies in the traps, you can accompany your 'brother' out the airlock."

With a shout, Rav mustered his thugs and stared for the chamber exit. They flooded after him, eager for plunder. Suddenly the two young men were alone. Pushing himself upright he regarded his savior warily.

*(And this was the moment, Jariah realized, when his life changed forever in ways he couldn't have dreamed back then. One little act of bravery- and yes, compassion- had changed his everything and brought him here.)*

The dreadlocked boy went down on a knee and offered one hand. "Jariah Syn. You are?"

"Cade," he muttered. The last name was a secret he dared not speak, not to these people, not to anyone ever. "Why'd you help me?"

"You're a castoff, like me. Knew you for a brother the moment I saw you, no matter what else you are." He clasped hands, squeezed tight. "And it's always good to have someone watching your back. Fair enough?"

Jariah's smile was bright and honest, the first honest one he'd seen in a long time. After everything that's happened-after wanting to die just minutes ago- he felt the unlikely warmth of hope.

He squeezed Jariah's hand and said, "Fair enough... brother."

*(Wherever here was.)*

Jariah woke with a jerk and a start. His heart thudded rhythmically in his chest. His hand shifted to find bandages wrapped around his abdomen. Sheets covered him from the waist down. He blinked his eyes and recognized torchlight on the rough ceiling of a cave.

"Do not strain, Jariah Syn," said the hissing voice of a Kwa. He rolled his head on the pillow and felt a straw stab between lips. He sucked water thirstily as the Kwa beside him said, "We have done what we can for your injury. You will heal, but it will take time. Rest now and mend yourself."

When he took his lips off the straw he muttered, "I had this... this dream... real vivid-like..."

That saurian face was hard to read, but he sensed curiosity. "What dream, Jariah Syn?"

"Just... a dream. About Cade... From a long time ago."

"I see."

"What? What do you see?" Alarmed for reasons he couldn't say, Jariah tried to prop himself on his elbows and get a better look at the cave. "Did something happen at the gate? Is Cade back?"

The creature sucked breath through teeth, turned, and hissed something to another Kwa standing by the cavern mouth. That Kwa ducked out; a moment later C-3PO came shuffling in.

"Threepio..." he rasped, actually glad to see the chatterbox. "What the hell happened?"

"Oh, goodness, there's been so much excitement, Master Jariah!" The droid lifted his metal arms as high as they'd go. "I was in the archives, translating a particularly interest fragment from-"

"The gate, *Threepio*. What happened?"

"Well, you see Master Jariah, the gate seemed to activate on its own, which the Keepers of the Whills insist has never happened in their recorded history. There was an immense expulsion of light and energy, apparently from the world on the other side of the gate."

"But... Cade?"

"I'm sorry, but there is, as yet, no sign of Master Cade." As Jariah fell back on his cot the droid went on, "But you see, something incredible has occurred! It seems that Master Lowbacca—"

The Wookiee's name was met by a Wookiee howl. Jariah looked and saw the tall furry Jedi bend his head to enter the cave. He immediately started barking and woofing, too fast for Jariah's addled mind to take in. He couldn't process the words, yet he understood.

"The Force?" he asked, struggling to sit upright again. "You've got the Force back?"

"Why yes, indeed he does, Master Jariah!" C-3PO explained. "During the energy expulsion, Master Lowbacca lost consciousness very briefly. He says he experienced something like a fever-dream, then awoke to find his connection with the Force restored. This is amazing news, don't you agree?"

Jariah felt a tremor run through his body. He picked one hand off the bed and stared at it. Somehow he felt like he was seeing himself anew.

C-3PO tilted his head. "I say, Master Jariah, are you quite alright? Perhaps you had better lie down."

He didn't lie down. He stared up at the Wookiee and into him. Knowledge came to him, irrational but certain. Lowbacca had had a dream, or a vision, where he saw through the eyes of another.

"The dream," he said, "It wasn't you in the dream... It was... your friends? You dreamed you were your old friends... on Kashyyyk? No... Yavin?"

Lowbacca stared back. Very softly, almost like he was scared, the Wookiee asked a question.

"Master Lowbacca asks how you knew that," C-3PO translated. Even the droid's voice wavered in confusion. "He has not shared this with anyone."

Jariah didn't know. He looked down at the hand that was his own, yet different. There was no way he *could* know that, not unless he'd suddenly had the Force baked into him-

"Oh," he whispered. "Oh, fierfek. I have to be dreaming still."

C-3PO tilted again in confusion, but Lowbacca moaned softly. No, the Wookiee said. He'd never been more awake.

## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

The object waiting for them at journey's end sent shock rippling through the Je'daii's meld and stirred Lanoree Brock from the dreamlike state in which she'd spent the voyage. Still strapped in her meditation couch in the main hold, she could feel the twenty-eight other Je'daii packed aboard this refitted Rakatan gunship. She could feel the Kwa and Gree fleets behind her as a formless, incomprehensible mass of alien minds, and she could feel the two Tho Yor that led them from Tyhton to here as beacons of ancient power, softly touched with the life-essence of a Je'daii seer.

And Lanoree could feel the object beyond the two Tho Yor. It was singular and it was massive, the Tho Yor's power magnified on greater scale and wholly beyond mortal thought.

Lying in her couch she felt vertigo. The sensation of this place reminded her of nothing more than the Chasm of Tython, the one that had housed the Kwa infinity gate and been protected by layers of primal Force power that had nearly driven Hawk Ryo mad and done worse to other Je'daii.

*I am the Chasm*, her brother had said. *I have depths waiting to be filled. Places you can never see, and go, because you're Je'daii and my depths are my own. Not steered by someone else.*

Dalien had been mad. He'd also, perhaps, stumbled on some truth, though it was impossible to tell.

What Lanoree felt ahead of her emanated peril and revelation. With effort, she unstrapped from her couch and staggered for the bridge.

Master Quan-Jang was still there, and Hawk Ryo had already arrived. She saw their backs, and the backs of other Je'daii crew as they stood on the command deck. All were angled forward to see through the viewport.

Lanoree followed their gaze and froze. The object ahead, the object she'd felt, was shaped like a Tho Yor but different. The double-pyramid's sides were smooth, not rocky. There were no eight-spoked wheel icons on its sides but instead faint, straight lines that cut across and intersected, forming patterns that glowed faintly red.

The two Tho Yor had drifted near the object and looked like children returning to a parent. They were utterly dwarfed by it; the object must have been over a thousand times more massive, far larger than any constructed device Lanoree had ever seen.

And there was no doubt this object had been constructed. When, by whom, for what purpose; none of the Je'daii had any idea. Lanoree wasn't sure she wanted an answer. Dal had shown her that some depths shouldn't be explored.

With a shaky voice, Quan-Jang said, "Ranger Ryo, try and make contact with our friends. Ask them if they understand what the hell this is."

"Gladly," the Twi'lek said. He worked the comm console for a minute then looked up, frowning. "I can't make any transmission. Nothing's going through."

"Are the ships out there?" asked Lanoree.

"They're on our sensors. They're there. Something must be jamming our comms."

"Yeah," she breathed, "Something."

The Je'daii stared out the viewport. Their gunship was still moving forward but slowly; the great object swelled closer and closer.

"Hold," Quan-Jang said, voice cracking. "Stop our approach. Don't take us further."

"No problem there," muttered the Je'daii controlling helm.

Lanoree could feel the surge of questions and confusion from every Je'daii in the meld. She also felt Hawk reaching

out to the Tho Yor, imploring the ghost of his niece for instruction.

No answer came. Attention settled on Quan-Jang; if they couldn't get knowledge they could at least have decision from the mission's leader.

The Je'daii Master sighed heavily. With effort he turned from the viewport and looked straight at Lanoree. "Ranger Brock, with me. We'll take the Hunter and get closer to the object."

She blinked. "Me, sir?"

"Yes, you. Ranger Ryo, stay on the bridge. Monitor us and keep trying to communicate with the Tho Yor."

"Understood," Hawk nodded.

Without another word, Quan-Jang moved for the exit. Lanoree hurried after him. Last time they'd left on the Hunter it had been for a parley, and they'd brought no weapons. This time they did. Quan-Jang armed himself with one of the Forcesabers the Je'daii had adopted from the Rakata. Its sizzling blade of pure, lethal Force energy was fueled by the emotions of its wielder and though Lanoree had used the alien weapons before they had always filled her with unease. She felt more comfortable with the metal sword she usually used and elected to take that aboard the Hunter.

As she pushed the starfighter away from the gunship, she admitted to herself that mortal weapons of any kind would probably be useless for what lay ahead.

From the passenger's seat behind her, Quan-Jang asked, "Can you contact the gunship?"

Lanoree checked comms. "Nothing."

The Master grunted; they'd both expected as much. Lanoree wheeled them around the gunship, giving them both a direct view of the assembled Gree and Kwa fleets, then turned back to the Tho Yor and the great object beyond.

"The size is incredible," Quan-Jang muttered. "It should have its own gravitational pull."

Experimentally, Lanoree pushed the fighter ahead, then killed thrust. She didn't detect any additional tug, the way she would have if falling toward a moon or planet. Firing engines again, she began a controlled approach. The object swelled closer and closer, filling the viewport. As she

watched, red light tracing lines on its surface seemed to pulse, growing brighter then dimmer, but without steady rhythm. Whatever they approached was powerful and alien even beyond anything on Tython.

She had to wonder what Dal would have made of it.

A cool tingling crept up her spine. "Master," she said, "Do you think we should-"

Lanoree didn't get another word out. Consciousness was extinguished like a candle in fierce breeze.

When she woke up, she was in sunlight. Lanoree pried open her eyes. She was still in the cockpit of her Hunter, strapped in the pilot's seat, with Quan-Jang in the passenger's chair behind her. Green fronds brushed the bubble-dome from the outside. Beyond them, blue sky.

None of it made sense. Lanoree unbuckled herself and twisted in her seat. "Master, are you awake? Master?"

Quan-Jang jerked at the sound of her voice. She couldn't see his eyes beneath the lenses of his glasses but she sensed they were fluttering open. He looked around and saw what she did.

"Open the cockpit," he said.

She looked at the Hunter's control board. Everything was dark, like the ship had been totally robbed of power. "We don't know if the air outside's breathable."

"Open it," he said again.

She obeyed. After manually releasing the pressure locks, she stood up in her seat, raised both hands, and shoved the cockpit bubble upward. When Quan-Jang joined her they succeeded in pushing it all the way back. Their reward was a faceful of fresh, beautiful breeze.

Now Lanoree was more unsettled than ever. She stepped carefully out of the cockpit and slid down the side of the Hunter. Her boots touched damp soil. She and Quan-Jang walked around the ship, examining it. They had set down on the ground without extending landing gear but there was no sign of a crash and the hull appeared undamaged. It was as though their ship had simply materialized in this jungle. She looked up and saw a single bright light through the shifting of palm-fronds, white like Tython's sun.



"Do you think we're... inside the object?" asked Lanoree.

"I don't know where else we could be."

Lanoree reached out and stroked a fern. "Is this... real?"

Quan-Jang looked at her, said nothing, then started pushing through the forest.

Lanoree followed him. They pressed through tangles of branches, stepped over jutting plants, and wound around rough-barked trees. The Force was alive here and all around her, but it also felt raw somehow, half-formed.

As she tried to think of a comparable place on Tython, Quan-Jang pushed into what seemed like a clearing. Lanoree followed him and discovered a high-grass field that quickly fell into a steep downhill drop. Beyond the hill was a spread of ridges, some draped in green with higher peaks turning barren and rough. In the far distant she saw what appeared to be a castle perched atop a mountain, tall tower jutting toward the sky.

As she watched the air around the tower grew dark. Clouds marshalled out of nowhere and a strong, cold wind blew. The forest and the grass trembled violently and chill bit the bare skin of her face.

Lanoree wanted to ask just what this place was, but she knew Quan-Jang was just as clueless as her.

In the space of a minute clouds became black. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed within. And then, out of nowhere, a shrieking filled the sky. They followed the sound and saw a creature swooping down at them. Fleshy wings were spread wide and twin sets of talons stretched out to grab. Lanoree and Quan-Jang broke in different directions and the creature slashed between them, touching air. Lanoree drew her blade; Quan-Jang his Force-saber. They spun on their heels to watch the creature wheel up into the sky, then flatten its wings and dive down for another attack.

This time it came directly for Quan-Jang. Lanoree tried to shove the diving creature with the Force but couldn't move it. Quan-Jang stood firm, let it fall, then attempted to sidestep at the last second and slash its talon with his saber.

Instead the creature twisted; one foot slammed into the Master's side and knocked him to the ground. The creature

unleashed another horrible shriek and flapped skyward for a second pass.

Lanoree rushed to Quan-Jang's side. He was groaning in pain but she saw no blood. The creature was flying down at them again. Lanoree grabbed the Force-saber in her free hand and, giving her anger and fear within her free reign, found the power to ignite it. Standing over Quan-Jang to protect him, she held both weapons up and waited for the next strike.

Seconds before the creature hit, another avian burst in and took it from the side. Lanoree watched in shock as the two creatures battle in the air with slapping wings and slashing talons. The newcomer was lighter in color, almost luminous compared to the dark predator who'd attacked them.

Lanoree sensed they had nothing to fear from this newcomer, despite the vicious fight. Even stranger, she sensed that the new creature was perfectly in tune with Ashla, the Force's light side. The attacker was pure Bogan, dark and angry.

After a minute the attacker let out one more shriek, then flapped wings and pushed skyward. It soon disappeared among the billowing clouds and then, even more shocking, the clouds themselves retreated. Faster than they'd come they disappeared, revealing blue sky. Warm breeze blew across the field once more. Lanoree turned to Quan-Jang and found him sitting upright on his elbows, not seriously injured.

And then the luminous creature descended to the hilltop. Its inner light grew brighter until the Je'daii had to look away. When the light faded the creature was gone but a woman was present among the grass. Green hair billowed down her back. Her dress was loose, diaphanous and white. Her face and body seemed human, but in the Force she was anything but. This woman had the same inner light and the same feel as the beast-form she'd just taken: pure Ashla.

Lanoree understood only one thing. Those mythic Gree and Kwa her brother had chased were, in the end, mortal beings like Je'daii. This woman was different. If there was such a thing as a god in this universe, it was her.

She was, therefore, unsurprised when the woman said in their language, "Are you injured?"

"I was," Quan-Jang said, feeling his torso. "The pain is... gone now."

"I am glad," the woman said. With the flick of a hand, Quan-Jang was pulled to his feet. "I'm so sorry about my brother's behavior. He's never been accommodating to guests."

Lanoree searched the clear sky for the monster that had attacked them. "That was... your brother?"

"As best you can understand it, yes." She said it kindly, without condescension.

Quan-Jang asked, "Are we inside the object? The great Tho Yor?"

Her smile was soft. "This is not a Tho Yor, though I can understand why you'd think it was. You're Je'daii, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"I'm glad. My father has been waiting a long time for you to come. Follow me. I'll take you to him."

With no further explanation, the woman turned and began walking away from them. Lanoree looked at Quan-Jang. All the Je'daii Master could do was shrug. Together, they followed the woman down the hill.

The journey took forever and no time. Despite the winding passages, steep hills, and steeper mountains they climbed, Lanoree did not feel exhausted by the journey. The Force was strong here and it was everywhere, and it gave them both strength.

She sensed that the woman didn't need the Force for strength at all. She was such a singularity of Ashla that the Force conformed itself to her as she moved. If they'd been travelling with the creature of Bogan, her so-called brother, the journey would have been unbearable. Instead, this long trek to the mountaintop castle felt like the most invigorating stroll.

The castle itself was magisterial and empty. Its single tower was an artificial peak stabbing toward the lightly-clouded sky. The woman led them down long hallways where stained-glass windows dyed color onto flat stone walls, then up a winding staircase. There seemed to be no lifts here,

no sliding doors, no signs of technology at all, but Lanoree knew that whoever had made it possessed knowledge and power that far outstripped the Je'daii's. During the long walk they tried to talk to the woman and get some explanation as to what this place was, how it existed, and who she and her brother were. Always the woman demurred, saying her father would tell them everything they needed to know.

Once they finished ascending the long stairway- which should have left them exhausted but didn't- they stood on a balcony jutting out from the fore of the castle. A stony cliff fell down far beneath them, and when Lanoree looked up she saw the tower peak rising up another two hundred meters.

"Incredible view," Quan-Jang admitted as he peered down the gap. "But where is this father?"

"Are you impatient?" asked a voice behind them.

Both Je'daii turned to see a new figure had appeared on the balcony. Standing beside the daughter was the father: an old man in layered robes and tall hat, with a white beard falling halfway down his chest. He looked and sounded human, but he wasn't. In the Force he was like his daughter but different; she was pure Ashla but he was in perfect balance, the kind Je'daii strived for but could never attain.

"Forgive me," Quan-Jang said, "But we've come a long way to be here, and we'd like to know why."

The old man stepped closer. His eyes, small and kindly but a disconcerting gold, examined them each in turn. "Did you depart from Tython?"

"We did. We were guided here by the Tho Yor and travelled on a captured Rakatan warship." He examined the father closely "Did *you* create the Tho Yor?"

The old man smiled gently and evaded the question. "Tell me, did you come aboard a Rakatan vessel?"

"They invaded our home system," Lanoree said. "It took a great war, but we drove them out, with the Tho Yor's help."

"The Rakata power their ships with the dark side of the Force. They harvest suffering and agony as fuel. Yet I do not sense you two have tipped to the dark. How is this?"

"We modified the Rakatan warship," said Quan-Jang. "It's still powered by the Force, but our Je'daii give of themselves voluntarily. We join our minds and keep them in balance."

The old man narrowed eyes, like he was peering into the Master's heart. "I sense truth in your words. That is good. It means you have passed the tests set for you thus far."

"Is the Tho Yor one of those tests?" asked Lanoree. "Did you create them?"

"They are my creations, and in a fashion they are tests." He smiled gently. "And there are more to come."

Her mind spun, dizzy with questions. "But why did you test us? Why gather all the Je'daii with the Tho Yor?"

"I gathered you because you were *not* Je'daii." He looked at the blue sky. "The Force is not what it was. It has withdrawn from you. The Rakata, you have noticed, are all capable of using it."

"We have noticed," Quan-Jang said. "Only a fraction of the beings in the Tythan system can touch it. Often children born of Je'daii can't and have to be exiled to the outer worlds. It's often painful and we never understood why."

"The Force touches all living things. It is the natural flow of the universe that binds all life together. Though it moves, it can be quieted, even silenced." He gestured to his daughter. "Most of our kind have withdrawn from the galaxy as you know it and have been taking the Force with them. They believe it is too much for mortals, that you are corrupted by it."

"Your kind?" asked Quan-Jang. "You mean like your... daughter, and son?"

"We three have stayed behind while the others have left," the daughter said. "They've given up their bodies and joined fully with the Force."

Lanoree struggled to wrap her mind around it. "We've seen you change form."

"We are still beings of matter. With the Force we have more control over it than you." She touched her chest. "We can die, like you, though we do not age like you. Time here is not as you know it."

Lanoree had already figured that. The father said, "The Gree, the Kwa, and other ancient races used to command the Force, but it has withered in them as well. For you younger races, the withdrawal is even more pronounced. The Rakata appear to command the Force, but it is leaving them, slowly

and steadily. They know it and are afraid. That is why they sought Tython, you see.”

“They wanted the Kwa infinity gate,” Lanoree said. “The gateway to every world inside our Chasm.”

The father held up a finger. “The gateway to specific worlds they believed would restore their full power in the Force. And that gate would have.”

“The gate was destroyed,” said Quan-Jang, “But not before some power escaped it. Was that what activated the Tho Yor?”

“That is correct. The Rakata are destruction embodied. In giving themselves fully to the dark they’ve become abominations. As they slowly lose the Force, they become more desperate and more dangerous. For that reason I created the Tho Yor. The galaxy must be defended from threats like them. The only defense that can possibly win against them is the Force, but Force-users have become rare and scattered. I knew they could only be strong if they were gathered together in one place to learn and master their power.”

“So you created the Je’daii to fight the Rakata?” asked Lanoree.

“I created you to protect this galaxy, and to keep balance in yourselves.” The old man looked between them. “This is a mission that never ends. Even when the Rakata are gone there will always be dangers. My son has given himself fully to the dark side of the Force, and you can see the monster he has become. I’ve done everything I can to preserve balance in this galaxy, but I am just one being. Even I cannot do everything.”

These creatures may not be immortal formless gods, Lanoree thought, but they were still close. She said, “The Tho Yor led us to a fleet of Gree and Kwa first. Was that also part of your design?”

“It was. I felt you were leaving Tython at long last, just as I felt the struggle of your new allies. Thus, I passed my will to the Tho Yor, and to Tasha Ryo.”

“One Tho Yor remains on Tython,” said Quan-Jang. “And another dropped into that ocean world. Was *that* your design, too?”

"It was." The father smile faintly. "The Force whispers hints of the future. Even I cannot always hear clearly, but I can plant seeds. You, my Je'daii friends, are seeds too. I have a destination for your journey's end."

"And where is that?"

The old man looked thoughtful once more. "I said the Rakata hunt a world they think can restore the Force to them all. It is imperative those monsters never reach it. It is also essential the door to that world remain open."

A shiver ran down Lanoree's spine. It felt like cold destiny. "The Gree have a dismantled hypergate with them."

"That is correct. Gree gates link to specific partners. The match for the dismantled gate lies on the outermost edge of the galaxy, far from the reach of the Rakata. There is a world on which they must rebuild the portal."

"A world that could restore the Force to the Rakata," said Quan-Jang. "Or anyone."

"There are planets more ancient than you can know, where the Force is raw and inchoate. They are rare, and increasingly hard to reach as they fall toward the very center of the galaxy. I believe only a few are still reachable." He spread a hand. "This planet was like them once, until we tamed its raw power and made it a reflection of our will. The door to such a world should remain open and guarded, so that those who can maintain balance can pass through it."

Lanoree's mouth was dry. "So you're saying we need to take the Gree to one of these planets. So they can build a gate."

"I am giving instruction to your Tho Yor as we speak. They will guide you the rest of the way to a world that will be closed off from passage in a mere thousand Tythan years. After that, it will only be reachable by the gate. The Rakata may hound you still. Your allies and their gate must be protected at all cost."

"And what happens *then*?" asked Quan-Jang. "You say these worlds can open the Force to anyone. Does that include people who'd never touched it in their lives?"

"The Force touches all life," the father said, "And like life, the Force seeks to perpetuate itself. It seeks to grow. I believe that, were it damaged badly enough by a darkness

greater than the Rakata, the Force might summon enough power to create life itself, a being that would control the scales of light and dark even better than I. They will fill the wound and become a bridge across the layers of the Force. I believe such a being could turn such a world into a wellspring from which the essence of the Force spreads across the galaxy entire. But that one would have to be exceptional. Powers greater than mine would have to have a hand in their creation.”

Gods after all. Lanoree’s head swam. She could never understand these creatures’ powers or origins. She didn’t even know if she could trust them. The truth that reverberated in her head, above all else, was that a gate needed to be built.

“We have a piece of a gate,” she croaked. Each word felt weighted down by fate. “We... recovered it on Tython. A dark matter power core that’s supposed to fuel a Gree hypergate.”

“Then you see what the Force is moving you toward,” the old man smiled.

Moving her, moving Dal, moving ever Je’daii and maybe every Rakata, Gree, and Kwa. Destiny made her faint and Quan-Jang steadied her with a hand to her shoulder.

“I understand what you’re setting us toward,” the Master said. “Thank you for the clarity. But we’d like to know better what you *are*. The Gree and Kwa seem to think you’re deities. What I’ve seen are like symbols embodied. A daughter who is pure Ashla and a son who is Bogan. And you keep them in tenuous balance...”

A scream filled the air. Without a dark cloud or thunder-clash, a black gargoyle fell from the sky. The Je’daii jerked back from the balcony’s edge as it tucked in its wings and came in for landing. Talons clasped the railing and it raised its ugly head for another shriek. Lanoree and Quan-Jang covered their ears and looked away; the father and daughter hadn’t budged.

When they looked back the creature was gone. A man stood on the railing; he was dressed in black but his eyes glowed gold and the skin on his bald head was gray striped with scarlet. He emanated darkness.



"You've recruited them, father, haven't you?" the son asked. "More mortals to do your bidding."

"These are Je'daii," the daughter said. "They're what father has labored to make for ten thousand years."

The son appraised them with a sneer. "My father wants to keep the balance in the Force. He's old and afraid of extremes. Are you afraid too, Je'daii?"

Lanoree had seen what extremes had done to Dal and the Rakata, what it was doing to the Je'daii left behind on Tython. She knew the necessity of balance, and so believed in the rightness of their mission, even if she didn't understand it.

"You have nothing to say to them, brother," the luminous woman said. "You should go now."

But the son peered down on the Je'daii. "They are young and small. They can be remade. They can have real strength if they want it."

"Brother—"

Lanoree's vision flickered to black. Light returned a second later but now storm-clouds had marshaled over the tower. The man was gone and the gargoyle beast had returned. It spread its wings, pumped wind across the balcony, then took to the air.

It shrieked as it wheeled and started to swoop on them again. Quan-Jang reached for his Forcesaber and ignited the beam. Lanoree gripped her sword.

"He is toying with you." The daughter sounded exasperated. "If you stay he will only harry you. It's best if you be gone now."

"Indeed," the old man said. "You have work to do."

"But we don't understand!" snapped Quan-Jang as he watched the son dive. "What *are* you people? Is this even real?"

"This is not reality," said the father. "This is truth."

And then the whole world went away.

Lanoree woke up among stars. She blinked clarity to her eyes and they resolved from darkness. She twisted her head and shoulders and found them strapped tight against a cushioned seat. Curved glass separated her from space. She

was back in her Hunter's cockpit. She strained, looked behind her, and saw Quan-Jang stirred, as though leaving deep sleep.

She remembered the castle, the clouded sky, the three beings who were more than real. She recalled what she'd been told once, possibly by Dam-Powl: a lie in the Force is truer than any mortal truth.

The scratching of her cockpit's speaker fully returned her to this plane. Hawk Ryo's voice said, "Hunter, do you respond? Can you hear us?"

Lanoree groped out and turned on the transmitter. "Yes. We hear you. I have Master Quan-Jang with me."

There was a pause, like Hawk was confused. Then he said, "I don't understand what happened. The object just... disappeared when you got close."

Lanoree stared out at the stars and realized that great monolith was gone. Only open space remained.

"Did you pick up any energy signatures when it left?" Hawk asked. "From here it looks like it just... winked out. Like it vanished without a trace."

She checked sensors. No energy traces or exhaust signatures. It was like the thing had never been there at all.

"It's like it ran from you as soon as you got close," Hawk said regretfully. "At least you tried."

"Wait a minute, Ranger Ryo," Quan-Jang said. "How long have we been away from the gunship?"

Another confused pause. "No more than ten minutes, Master. There was a short time, less than one minute, where you stopped in front of the thing. We tried to hail you but couldn't. And when it disappeared our comms came back online. We've checked in with the Gree and Kwa too."

"And they saw the same things you did?"

Cautiously, Hawk asked, "What should they have seen?"

Quan-Jang had no answer. Neither did Lanoree. She said, "We'll explain once we get back. Hawk, do the Tho Yor feel different to you?"

"...Possibly. I haven't tried reaching Tasha yet. I was worried about you."

"Concern's appreciated, but you should see what the Tho Yor have to tell you." Lanoree started power to engines and

was pleased how they easily hummed to life. "I think we have a new destination set."

"I see..." Hawk said, and clearly didn't.

Lanoree wheeled her Hunter back toward the gunship. The Tho Yor had settled on either flank while the motley Gree and Kwa fleets, including their massive flying cities, had settled beneath. It occurred to Lanoree that if the ones inside the monolith had really wanted to get their point across they should have spoken with the ones who already saw them as gods. But the father had wanted to meet the Je'daii, to speak with them and see if they'd passed his tests thus far.

The Je'daii were, in a sense, his children, and they meant more than worshippers ever could.

As their Hunter neared the gunship, Lanoree spotted new ships wink into existence around the fleet. Her stomach went cold; the Force told her what they were even before her sensors did.

"Those are Rakata out there!" she cried. "They found us!"

"We see them too," Hawk growled over the comm.

"Do we have directions from the Tho Yor?" asked Quan-Jang

"I... I think so. You need to get aboard, now."

"Sounds like a good idea," Lanoree growled. She jerked the stick hard, threw them into a tight turn, and pushed for the landing back on the friendly gunship.

She got aboard just as the Rakatan ships began their attack. As the Hunter skidded to a halt inside the hangar she was overwhelmed by the sensation of all the Je'daii crew, furiously concentrating despite their confusion and panic, injecting the ship with the power necessary to fling it through lightspeed.

Dimly, Lanoree thought that once this was over, they should swap this strange machine for something easier to power. Hopefully the Gree or Kwa could provide.

She and Quan-Jang were in no state of mind to join the others in their meditation couches. They hurried to the bridge in time to see starlines explode and the luminous whirl of hyperspace fill the viewport.

The sight was still surreal, but nothing compared to what she'd just been through.

Quan-Jang strode right for Hawk. "Do you have a destination? Did the Tho Yor tell us where to go?"

"Yes." Hawk looked exhausted; his face was pale, his lips dry. Conferencing with the Tho Yor must have taken something out of him.

"Do you know where we're going?" Lanoree asked.

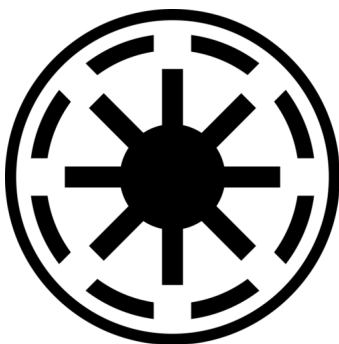
"It felt like back toward the Core... but not to Tython. We're going deeper, I think. It will take us many jumps to get there. I hope we can manage." He eyed them carefully. "Do *you* know where we're going?"

Lanoree and Quan-Jang exchanged looks, uncertain how to answer. In the end she said, "No. But we know why."

Hawk's face was a question. She had so much to tell him and, apparently, a long time to do it.

That was fine. She needed to rest, to think, to prepare. She understood almost nothing of what had happened back there, except the one thing that mattered most. All she'd been through had a purpose, and so did Dal, and that gave her all the strength she needed.

## PART III



THE FOREST OF DREAMS



## Chapter Twenty-One

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When *Free Agent* dropped out of hyperspace Coruscant exploded into view. Its daylit side was turned to face them and its endless surface cityscape gleamed in the light of orbital mirrors. Tiny lights, the drives of starships coming and going, were too many to count, though the larger bulks of several freighters and orbital skyhooks resolved as they fell in toward the planet.

"You know," Ania sighed, "I really haven't missed this place."

Strapped into seat behind her, Azlyn Rae reminded, "This is where we have to be."

"Oh, I'm aware." Ania glanced sideways at AG-37. "Is that false transponder going?"

"Correct. We are now identifying ourselves to Coruscant traffic control as the *Lucky Loser* out of Brentaal."

The false ID was one prepared by Rogue Squadron but never actually used, but Ania was pretty sure it would check out. It was one of several parting gifts given to her before she and Azlyn met up with AG-37. They'd ridden to the edge of the Core aboard *Mon Elusia*, then rendezvoused in deep space with *Free Agent*. Though Admiral Bey hadn't wanted them to know the location of the renegade Alliance fleet, Anj Dahl had surreptitiously passed on the coordinates. 'In case things get really borked and you have to find us on your own,' she'd said.

Well, Ania was always glad to have backup plans for backup plans. As *Free Agent* settled into high orbit, well

above the busiest transit routes, she brought the main comm online and patched in an encrypted call to their Plan A. She waited for nearly a minute before a holo sprung to view: one human male with a narrow face and totally bald pate.

She didn't even recognize him at first, but Azlyn did. Hanging over the back of Ania's seat she said, "It's good to see you, Ganner."

"Good to be seen," he smiled faintly.

"We have arrived over Coruscant," AG-37 said, "We will begin our descent to Galactic City shortly. Your current location is a civilian docking zone at Eastport, correct?"

"That's right."

"Then we will begin our approach to Westport." The droid gave the controls a nudge and sent *Free Agent* into a slow downward dive.

"Sorry we were a little late getting here," Azlyn said. "What's your sitrep?"

"Standing by and ready to go. We have people inserted at the appropriate sites." His eyes flicked meaningfully to Ania, which told her where her mother was. "The trial is set to start within three standard hours. Security over the judicial building has been tight since yesterday. The teams will get in motion as soon as the trial's, ah, surprise witness shows up." He meant, of course, Senator Derrol on *Mon Elusia*.

"Are you in *Champion* now?" asked Azlyn.

"That's right. We're standing by until the signal comes."

"Who's 'we'?" asked Ania, wondering which Mandos had stayed behind.

Ganner shifted in his seat and a Twi'lek Ania didn't recognize appeared. Azlyn, however, did. "Shado!" she exclaimed. "How did you get involved in this?"

"Our friend said he needed a good pilot." The Twi'lek's smile was dry, perhaps weary. "This ship is vintage, to put it mildly, but I think it has it where it counts."

"*Free Agent* is also ready, should our services be required," said AG-37.

"I don't doubt they are," said Ganner. "For security's sake we should maintain comm silence until things get moving."

"Agreed," said Ania. "We'll ping you when we've set down at Westport. Then we'll both hurry up and wait."



"That was the plan." Ganner didn't sound especially happy with his part in it. He opened his mouth- she thought he looked ready for a 'may the Force be with you'- but he closed it, then said, "Good luck, all of you."

"You too," Azlyn said. "We'll see you on the other side."

He nodded once, then closed the transmission. *Free Agent* was starting to enter the atmosphere, and Azlyn strapped in as friction rocked the cockpit. The great city-planet, home to a trillion beings, rushed up to meet them. Ania didn't like the ecumenopolis much, and frankly she could take or leave almost all of those trillion beings, but her mother was down there, in the thick of it. For that reason alone she was glad to be here, to lend any help she could.

Once the line with Ania Solo's ship closed, Ganner sat back in *Champion's* co-pilot seat. As she'd said, they could do nothing now except hurry up and wait. It left him stiff and anxious, and a sideways glance at Shado Vao told him the Jedi felt the same.

"Thank you for being here," he told Shado, trying to soothe both of them. "It helps a lot knowing we have a good pilot flying getaway."

The Twi'lek's eyes were on the cityscape ranged around them. From this distance and angle they couldn't see any of the government district, but sensors said the aerial patrols were twice as thick as normal, and the area around the judicial center was a straight-up no-fly zone. There were a lot of ways this could go wrong and it made him wish- even more than usual- they had the Force as their ally. Instead they'd have to go it alone.

After a thoughtful pause, Shado said, "I know that's not the only reason you asked me to join."

Ganner admitted the point with a tiny nod. "We could all use some hope right now."

"Maybe. But sometimes I think..." Shado sighed, shook his head. "Do you really believe everything will change if we rescue the empress?"

"It'll be pretty hard for Chalk to claim legitimacy when the galaxy hears what she has to say."

"I know. Still..."

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

Ganner waited for him to say more. He didn’t. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Shado glanced at him with a sad, sad smile. “Ganner, I remember the last time I had a *good* feeling about something. That ended horribly. I thought the Force was really speaking to me, telling me what to do... but I was just hearing what I wanted to hear and doing what I wanted to do.”

“We’re going to save Marasiah and expose Chalk’s lie. That’s a good for the whole galaxy. Objectively.”

Shado looked back out the viewport. “And do you think the Force wants this?”

“How could it not?”

Shado didn’t reply. As they settled in to wait Ganner took that as quiet acquiescence, but as time drew on and the silence between them grew louder, he started to think Shado’s non-response had been a question in return, one which- for the moment- he had no answer.

It struck Treis Sinde as a wise move politically that Chalk was not present for the trial of Admiral Stazi, Senator Kaige, Senator Nelloran, and- in absentia- Senator Derrol. By recusing himself, he made the statement that the trial was about justice, not him personally.

Treis was glad not to have Chalk’s black shape looming over him. It was difficult enough dealing with the many Imperial Knights that now filled the justice center. It seemed like half the Order was here; per Sigel Dare’s security strategy, each Knight had been paired with a team of six civilian security officers to make sure every square meter of the justice center was safe well in advance of the trial. Bomb-sniffers- both mechanical and animal- had scoured the building to its lowest levels and the courtroom was scanned hourly for listening devices, poison gas capsules, stray blaster charge packs, and anything else that might be dangerous in any way. At the same time, other Knights and security officers had investigated every possible danger from outside the justice center. Every witness was thoroughly vetted. Every street-whisper about the trial being bombed or

shot up was investigated. Treis had to give Sigel Dare credit; she'd made the most threatened building in the galaxy into its most secure.

That was one reason why Treis felt pangs of conscience. From a certain point of view, what he was doing was treasonous, but he didn't let that stop him. Ganner Krieg had presented him with compelling evidence that Marasiah was being held captive in the unused underlevels of the Department of Transportation tower. It was his duty- as her Knight, as a friend of her father- to see her freed.

It was to Treis' advantage that his seniority made other Knights hesitant to question him; even Sigel would balk to do so. This made it easier for him to make three last-minute personnel swaps to the security detail he was in charge of. Two civilian security men he'd originally been assigned with had been replaced by guests from Ganner's crew. The men- they'd given their names as Yangar and Hondo- had the lean, mean look of mercenaries but in the blue security officer uniforms they looked just acceptable shy of roughish. The third man, named Oren, had a smaller build and actually looked quite passable in his grey technician's clothes.

An hours before the trial was set to begin, Treis sent the three authentic members of his security team to reinforce the staff at the justice center's south gate, where weapons-checkers were scouring every audience member coming to the trial. He maneuvered Yangar, Hondo, and Oren into a section of hallway he knew to be unmonitored by listening devices and said, "All right, gentlemen. Tell me what you need from me."

"Nothing grandiose," said Oren. "I just need access to the security node that northwest side of the building, facing the transit department tower."

"I had a feeling you'd want that," Treis nodded. "Come with me."

He maneuvered them down the halls, passing a few other Knights and their security teams. Every red-armored man and woman gave Treis a small bow of deference as they passed.

"Glad we're getting the VIP treatment," Yangar muttered.

Treis knew his rank couldn't shield him from everything. They were about to commit sabotage in the most secure building in the galaxy; it was very possible they'd be caught. He just hoped they'd be able to do what was necessary to free Marasiah beforehand.

When they finally reached the security node it was, unsurprisingly, staffed by three other officers. Treis was prepared to order them out of the room but Oren quietly took a seat at an unused console with screen out of the others' view and got to work. Treis glanced awkwardly at Hondo and Yangar, each of whom replied with a small shrug. This was slicer's work, and outside their purview.

Oren didn't take long, only a few minutes, but they seemed to drag on forever as Treis waited for some alarm to flare up and the three real security officers to reach for their blasters. Yet none of that happened; once he was done, Oren stood up and announced, "Checks complete, sir. We can get going."

Treis was glad of it. He and the three mercenaries slipped from the station without another word and walked through the hall until Treis was sure they were in another dead zone.

"Well, what was that?" he asked Oren. "Did you disable the exterior sensors?"

"Not yet," the man shook his head. "What I did was slice in extra code that will allow me to kill the sensors facing the transit tower, and knock out power to levels eighty to ninety-four of the justice enter."

Treis frowned. "Why knock out power? And why there? It's well above us- and the courtroom."

"Exactly. It'll draw people up top to figure out what's going on, and hopefully they'll miss some dead exterior sensors. And the trial can keep rolling all the while, so we'll have their attention split in all kind of ways."

"You said you've planted the code. How do you activate it?"

"I'll need to access a terminal- any terminal- in the building." Oren tapped the white earpiece all security techs wore. "I've modified this to patch in with our evac team. When I get word from Ganner, I'll get over to a terminal really fast and activate the code. Then-" he snapped his fingers- "Chaos, on demand."

Treis looked to Hondo and Yangar. "And you gentlemen?"

"We're here in case things get nasty." Hondo patted his holstered service pistol.

"The Knights and security teams here are just doing their jobs. There's no reason to fight them. If we *are* found out, I intend to surrender without violence."

The mercenaries exchanged looks. "No offense," said Hondo, "but I'm in this for the money. Mostly. I'm certainly not doing this out of some kind of *di'kutla* Imperial honor."

"I want no unnecessary bloodshed. Is that clear?"

His Imperial Knights would have snapped bows and spluttered assurances. These mercenaries just exchanged another set of looks. Hondo said, "If we do things right, it shouldn't come to that. There's airspeeders docked at the west gate." He tapped his badge. "We've got authority to pull them. If things really look like they're gonna go *gettse-up* we'll make a run for it. You're welcome to come with, Master Sinde."

Treis felt reluctant; apparently he was willing to commit treason but not run from his crimes. "We will see," he muttered, then changed the subject. "I intend to be in the courtroom when the trial starts. You gentlemen can come with me. There's an access terminal right behind the security entrance."

"Sounds like a good setup to me." Oren glanced at his companions. "You barves want to witness some history?"

"I've already done that once or twice," Hondo said ambiguously. "But what the hell. I'm not going to pass up a front-row seat."

His hard eyes said he wasn't going to explain more. Treis accepted that and began leading them to the courtroom.

The area around the justice center was essentially on lockdown, but the engines of government had to keep churning elsewhere. Bureaucrats and civilians were still passing in and out of the transportation department headquarters, but the cavernous lobby was notably emptier than when Marin had done reconnaissance two days ago. Most eyes today would be on the trial, which might work in their favor or might not.

Marin, Sauk, and Tes Vevec all alighted the same speeder bus that ran loops around the government district, but they staggered themselves to enter the security queue at different points. Sauk went through first, passing a bag of tools onto the conveyor belt and into the scanning machine. After passing through the frame of the bio-scanner he explained to the Vuvrian guard on the other side that he was a contractor called in to run diagnostics on the south lift shaft and asked where to find it. Smart, Marin thought.

A few beings later, Tes passed through, dressed in a trim business jacket and skirt; unlike a lot of Mandos, she cleaned up nicely, and the Phindian security guard gave her bag only a minor glance as it passed through the scanning machine. Marin had inserted herself near the end of the line, and when she passed her own bag through the machine she reached out with the Force to touch the mind of the young Phindian. She had only a second to act, but in that time she found the surface-level memory of another Phindian- also young, female and apparently attractive for the emotional swell attached to her. She snagged it and brought it to the surface and watched the guard's eyes lose focus for a moment as his mind wandered to fonder things. Then he shook his head and re-focused on the scanner readout, but by that time Marin's bag had already passed through.

The three of them didn't congregate immediately after passing through security; that would have been too obvious. Sauk went right for the lift shaft but Marin and Tes split up and headed up a short escalator to a café used mostly by employees. A small congregation circled the holo-display in the far corner of the room, attention affixed to the news broadcast. That made it easy for Marin and Tes to sidle together in a booth and do what had to be done.

"Everything go smoothly?" Tes asked under her breath as she stuck a hand in her fashionable purse.

"So far," Marin muttered and reached into her own bag.

They did it all under the table. Marin passed a metal cartridge to Tes and Tes attached it to the ceramic firing mechanism she'd brought in her bag. The cartridge contained two dozen bullets, each filled with explosive powder. The firing mechanism provided the simple spark needed to set

one of them off. All they needed was the barrel, which was stuck in Sauk's tool bad. Even good security scanners like the ones here didn't recognize a slugthrower if it was brought in in pieces.

Tes took the almost-completed gun and slid it fully into her purse. "You have the lightsaber too?"

"Of course."

"When was the last time you used one of those, if you don't mind my asking?"

Tes hadn't even been born when Marin had last used one in combat, but she didn't say it. "I remember how to handle it. Don't worry. I expect to use this for chopping through doors, not people."

Tes didn't look assured. "Well. It's a good thing I've got an extra weapon. Are you ready?"

Marin looked at the holo across the room. "Don't think our distraction's shown up. They might be late."

"How long do you want to wait? Hondo, Oren, and Yangar are in position and ready."

"You talked to them?"

"Got a ping from Oren right before we got off the bus. He's done his job. We just have to do ours."

Marin took a deep breath. "Let me see if the trial's started."

She slid out of the booth and joined the crowd gathered around the news broadcast. Nobody glanced at her as she approached and she saw why. The commentary and prelude was gone, and the trial was getting started. The holo showed a high, long podium behind which five magistrates sat. Beneath them, sitting on the left-hand side, were the defendants and their counsel. Prosecution sat on the right. The magistrates seemed to be giving preliminary statements to both sides. Opening speeches- the real attention-grabbers- would begin soon. If Porat Derroll wanted to make his entrance extra-dramatic, that would be when he'd leap in.

Marin decided it was time to act, but she spared a moment to sense the feelings of the crowd in the Force. She'd been told that most of the civilian bureaucracy had passed from the Alliance to the Sith to the Federation intact, and sure enough, she felt anxiety and anger directed toward the

prosecution. At the same she felt a level of doubt not just to the outcome of the case, but to whether any of the accused had, in any way, been involved with the assassinations. Either these bureaucrats weren't die-hard Alliance partisans, or Chalk's machinations had succeeded in sowing quiet discord.

But that was not her concern. Marin turned and caught Tes' eyes across the room. She gave the tiniest nod, and the younger woman grabbed her purse and exited the café. Marin waited thirty seconds, then walked out as well. As she rode the escalator down to the lobby platform she looked for the south elevator column. She counted eight individual shafts collected together, and it wasn't until she rounded the column to the side facing away from the rest of the lobby that she found Sauk and Tes. Orange caution markers had been affixed to either side of one lift's door, but at the moment no riders were even using this column. The Mon Cal was passing what looked like a short piece of pipe- actually a gun-barrel- to the incognito Mandalorian, who screwed it tight to her weapon, completing the assembly.

"What have we got?" Marin asked under her breath.

"I've run diagnostics on this lift." Sauk waved a webbed hand at the datapad he'd affixed to the control panel. "It goes down fifty-six floors beneath this one, then stops. We should assume all the other lifts operate the same way."

"How far beneath is the empress supposed to be?" asked Tes as she tucked the gun into her purse.

"Between sixty-two and sixty-six. Roughly. Sauk, can you override those protocols?"

"I could try, but it would probably set off alarms," the Mon Cal said. "Besides, for all we know, they've physically blocked the bottom of the shaft."

Marin nodded; she'd expected it would come to this. "Where's the car for this lift right now?"

Sauk glanced at the datapad. "Twenty-one floors above us."

"Can you freeze it where it is?" asked Tes.

The Mon Cal's big eyes blinked; he bled anxiety in the Force. "Maybe, but that might also trigger an alarm."



"You won't have to, not yet." Marin put a hand on his shoulder. "Just stand by. Pretend to do diagnostics on this tube. If the car does start coming down, make sure it stops here and doesn't go further." She added with a little smile, "You look respectable. Just tell them you need to do maintenance."

As Sauk bobbed his head, Tes looked to Marin. "Does that mean we're going down the hard way?"

"Was there every any doubt?" With a wave of the hand and a tug of the Force, Marin pulled the tube doors open to reveal the long deep plunge of the shaft.

Sauk removed a pair of fiberchord spools from his pack and magnetically clamped them to the shaft's interior, one on either side of the door. Marin and Tes dropped their bags after retrieving only the things they'd need: a lightsaber and a slugthrower, plus two glow-lamps.

"Keep watch while we're going down," Marin said. "When we get to the bottom we'll send the chord back up. Once it retracts, get out of here. Make your way back to Eastport if you can."

"I know." Sauk hesitated, groping for something to say. He went with, "May the Force be with you."

"I sure as hells hope so." Marin patted his shoulder. "We'll see you on the other side."

They checked around the lobby to make sure no one was nearby or watching. Once they were certain things were clear, Marin and Tess bent into the open shaft and gripped the handlebar at the end of cable spool. Marin used the Force to lift both their bodies fully into the shaft; from there, gripping the handlebars tight with both hands, they thumbed the extension button and began a long straight plunge, down into the dark.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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The touch of the Force was the touch of life, and everything seemed different for its return. Through the Force Lowbacca could feel the bonds that connected him to all living beings and shared with him a part of their existence. He knew the religious awe of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors and the thoughtful contemplation of the Kwa. He felt Darth Talon's numbing despair, Deliah Blue's confusion, and Jao Assam's quiet envy. He saw all the frantic emotions ready to break Jariah Syn from the inside-out. Most of all, he felt the echoes of primal power emanating from the hypergate arch.

Though Lowbacca had heard the Force's call for nearly a century and a half, one year of silence had nearly quashed its memory. Now the silence was over and it brought a rush of wonder he hadn't known since his long-ago training on Yavin 4. He was at the mouth of something immense and ancient, and it was difficult to restrain the urge to dive into it.

But in a century and a half Lowbacca had learned restraint. The Keepers of the Whills had held watch over the gate for millennia and collected a history that beggared anything else in the galaxy. He'd let them have their say before passing to the other side.

Torches flickered in the subterranean library, which was probably more packed with people now than it had been for many centuries. The elder Kwa called E'Lorem stood next to a pile of manuscripts and C-3PO, who explained, "According to the portion of the Journal I have read, there is no mention of the hypergate ever acting in such a way. As you know,

concentrated Force power is required to open it from either side. As it opened when it did- that is to say, then no one on *our* side was exerting the Force on it- it is logical that the activation came from the other side.”

“We get that much, professor,” Jariah said. He slumped on a stool looking more exhausted than anything. Deliah hung behind him, hand on his shoulder for stead or comfort. “What does that have to do with that blast of karking.... Whatever came out of that thing?”

“Nothing like this has happened for all the millennia we have been here,” E’Lorem said. “However, based on what we know of the other side, I suspect there was a massive eruption of Force power.”

“An eruption from where?”

“From the skin of the planet itself,” the Kwa hissed. “Think of that world as volcanic and half-formed, only instead of molten lava beneath the crust there are pockets of raw, immense Force power.”

“Then what caused the eruption?” asked Deliah. “Was it something Cade did?”

“Perhaps.”

Thoughtful silence filled the room. Lowbacca could feel doubts and fears swimming inside everyone. In a voice of pained hope, Jao asked, “Is it possible something else triggered what happened with the gate? Maybe there was some residual energy left over from the last time it was used?”

Lowbacca roared the obvious suggestion, and C-3PO said, “I believe you are correct, Master Lowbacca. The only way to know what’s happened on the other side of the gate is to go through it.”

“The other side is extremely dangerous,” said E’Lorem, “Especially if there has been an eruption.”

“Well what do you expect us to do?” Deliah waved an arm. “Just give up on our friends? No karking way.”

Jariah put a hand on hers. “Somebody’s gotta be over, but it ain’t gonna you, Blue. Unless you wanna get the Force baked into you like me.”

From the back of the room, unarmed and unbound but flanked by two Yuuzhan Vong guards, Darth Talon said, “I still do not understand how this happened. Jariah Syn never

had the Force before. He never had enough midi-chlorians. How can he touch the Force now?"

"Maybe he did have enough midi-chlorians," Jao suggested. "Whatever power he had just got overlooked, or manifested itself in a way nobody noticed."

"You mean like dead aim and good looks?" Jariah snorted. "I've had those all my life. They don't feel a damn thing like I feel now."

The Yuuzhan Vong standing on Talon's right said in clear Basic, "We have no midi-chlorians in our bodies at all, yet we to were gifted with the Force on that world. The power was so strong we can now connect without them."

"And I got fried with some of that." Jariah looked at his hands. "How can I make it go away?"

Lowbacca gave a low roar. The Force was a gift; he shouldn't be so eager to throw it aside.

Jariah's face twisted. "With all due respect, kark that. I've seen what the Force put my brother Cade through. I don't want any of that *vermo* destiny."

"For the moment," Talon said, "That it our secondary concern. We must learn what happened on the other side of the Gate. To do that we must go there."

"You volunteering, *cheeka*?" asked Jariah.

Talon didn't have to answer; she knew they'd never let her. Her escape stunt hadn't killed anyone but it had injured several badly, and while she protested they had nothing to fear from her no one was going to trust her.

Though her red-and-black face was still, Lowbacca could feel the pain in her heart. If she hadn't made that escape attempt she'd have been on Rohakalla when the energy escaped the gate. It would have almost certainly reawakened her Force powers as it had Lowbacca's. Impetuousness had robbed her of the thing she craved most and she was writhing in regret. He could feel something similar from Jao, though he is Force-aura was tinged with bitter disbelief instead of self-hatred. Deliah, for all her confusion, was relieved not have been inflicted with unwanted power like Jariah.

He soaked those facts in gladly. After so long being trapped within himself, Lowbacca found he took joy in these shared emotions, unhappy as they were.

"Darth Talon is fundamentally correct," that same Yuuzhan Vong said. "Someone must go beyond the gate to explore and to find our missing comrades. Any of us are ready to go."

"I knew you would be, Xahn Carr." E'Lorem dipped his head in a nod. "I will leave it to you to select your team."

Lowbacca couldn't restrain himself any longer, and he announced his intentions with a trilling roar. C-3PO said, "Master Lowbacca announces he is eager to join you beyond the gate."

Xan Carr looked suddenly reluctant and E'Lorem said, "One's first time beyond the gate can be quite dangerous. Now moreso than ever."

"Lowie's one of the most powerful Jedi Masters around," Jariah said. "If anyone can handle himself over there, it's him."

"You do not understand," said Xahn Carr. "It is his power which may make things *more* dangerous. That is why Khat Lah took the two youths through first."

"Yeah, and he also Cade *grancha* Skywalker. Cade's nothing *but* powerful."

"That," said E'Lorem, "may be why things have gone so awry."

It was a hard point to argue, but Lowbacca barked insistence. The Yuuzhan Vong would be capable searchers, yes, but as a Jedi with over a century of experience he stood a better chance of dealing with untoward threats than anything. Xahn Carr and his people, by contrast, were new to their powers and barely trained.

"Very well," Xahn Carr relented. "You may come."

"I'd like to go too," Jao spoke up, as Lowbacca had known he would.

The Yuuzhan Vong shook his head. "Reawakening to your Force powers will not be easy. Now, when things are so uncertain, is not the time to do it."

"Lowbacca get his powers back fine," Jao pressed. "Hell, even Jariah could handle it."

"Gee, thanks," the other grouched.

E'Lorem said, "This world is very different from the one beyond. With the Force as raw as it is, matter itself may bend

to your thoughts and fears. It is not safe for you to reawaken now.” He swung his vertical-slit gaze to Talon. “Nor you.”

Jao grimaced but assented. Talon’s face was a hard mask.

Lowbacca gave a roar. It was time to get moving. Everyone in the room understood the point, if not the words. As people started to file out R2-D2, silent in the corner for most of the meeting, released a series of shrill tweets.

“Oh, Master Lobwacca,” said C-3PO, “Artoo would like a short word with you.”

Lowbacca stepped over to the droids. It occurred to him now that he’d known these two machines longer than he’d known anyone in the galaxy outside his parents and sister. Though he’d sometimes gone years without seeing them they’d always been there, moving through the background of history like a needle and thread knitting far-flung events together. Everything felt new, strange and, yes, dangerous, but it was a comfort knowing they were still around.

C-3PO said, “Artoo implores you do everything in your power to save Master Cade. Artoo is quite fond of him... and despite his insouciant demeanor I admit he’d grown on me as well.”

R2 hummed soft agreement. Lowbacca knew that the droids’ bond with Cade was not so different from his own. They’d both seen generations of Skywalkers live, grow old, and die, and in their ancillary ways all three of them had pushed the story of that fabled family along. In protecting Cade, Lowbacca would be protecting Kol, Jade, Ben, and Luke as well. He’d known and learned from them all and he owed them a collective debt beyond words.

Lowbacca roared heartfelt assurance that he’d stop at nothing to protect Cade. Then he turned and marched his way to the surface, where mystery and destiny waited.

When Eli awoke the world seemed to emerge not from the darkness of sleep, but the blinding light of revelation. At the moment of waking he couldn’t remember anything that came before. He only knew that he was in a forest, lying on his side in the brush. One hand sprawled in front of him; he watched his fingers twitch, seemingly of their own volition.

He realized there was a high, constant whine in his ears. He forced himself to sit upright; his entire body was sluggish. He brushed dirt off his clothes and struggled to stand upright. He noticed the dim red light falling through the forest leaves and he remembered what strange world he was on. Something was different; he looked at the canopy and realized it was shifting violently, thrown about by heavy winds. There'd never been wind on this planet, not before. A hot gust slapped his face and mussed hair around his head.

Eli staggered and spun in a circle. When they'd first come here there's been a light, a great and brilliant geyser of pure Force energy that had drawn them forward through the woods. There was no light now and no point of direction. He remembered more: Cade Skywalker descending into the pit from which the light erupted. Khat Lah holding the fiberchord reel with which he was supposed to pull Skywalker back in an emergency. It was clear that hadn't gone to plan. He remembered watching Skywalker step up to the light and reach out with the Force. He remembered the light flaring wider until it was impossible to look into; Skywalker had disappeared from view but not from the Force. In the Force his presence had seemed to join with the eruption's and become it. Eli had been overwhelmed, and he remembered Kyra letting out a wordless shout of panic, fear, maybe agony.

Without warning the forest floor quaked under Eli's feet, and he remembered one more thing. With the light had come a burst of wind and a trembling in the earth. He'd been thrown back from the pit's rim, back into the forest from which they'd come.

He spun around once more. In the red light and shadow he saw no rim, no pit, no light. He saw none of his companions either and none of the ghosts that had haunted them on their long journey to this place.

He was alone and lost in this horrible, incomprehensible place. Eli's heart went cold with fear.

He staggered through the forest, looking in every direction, trying to hear something besides the ringing in his ears. He began to make out the groan of wind and the violent slap of

leaves overhead. He shouted for help and heard his own voice, weirdly muffled.

With the wind blowing hard the trees were always shifting, and the world around him a constantly-shifting kaleidoscope of shadows and scarlet. The colors of Sith, he realized, and the thought left him nauseous. Eli wished he'd let Darth Nihl kill him along with the other captured apprentices. A righteous death would have been a far better fate. Instead he'd sold his self for the fleeting illusion of power when the full strength of the Force was so far beyond him. He'd been an angry child lashing out at the universe; now it felt like the universe was striking back, crushing him beneath its impossible weight.

Suddenly his foot hit a root. Eli fell and barely caught himself in the dirt. He pushed himself up with his hands but before rising he saw a patch of red sunlight and the object inside. He recognized the smooth lump as one of the backpacks they'd brought with them from Rohakalla. Eli crawled on frantic hands and knees. Some objects had spilled out of it: wrapped foodstuffs, a sealed bottle of water. As he stuffed them back inside his hand found something else. He wrapped fingers around the hard metal cylinder and pulled it out.

Cade Skywalker's lightsaber. He had no idea where Skywalker was now; maybe not even on this plane of existence. He thumbed the trigger and green light lanced out. He heard the hum beneath the fading ring in his ears; it was the most beautiful sound in the universe, simply because it was familiar.

Eli hooked Skywalker's weapon to his belt. He sealed the pack and slung it over both shoulders. The food and water ensured he could survive a little longer. He spun around once more and looked for something familiar in the shifting, Sith-colored landscape. He was still lost in a maze. With no better option, he began walking forward.

He stumbled through the forest, making high steps so as not to trip over any more roots. He saw the movement of light and water and cut toward it. A thin stream ran through moist earth, maybe the one they'd refilled at before. He



started to follow the path downstream, hoping it might lead him out of the forest.

A voice called his name. He heard it, loud and clear. Eli turned and saw a dark form moving through the forest. His hand went to the lightsaber but before he turned it on he recognized Kyra. She had a pack with her, maybe her own, and she breathed heavily as she approached, as though she'd been running through the forest.

When she got near she stopped, eyes on the lightsaber. "Where'd you get that?" she asked, voice hoarse.

Eli had more important things to deal with than her distrust. Holding his hand far from the weapon he said, "I found Skywalker's pack in the forest. When I woke up, I didn't have mine."

"Have you seen him or Khat Lah?"

He wagged his head. "Just you. I don't know what happened. I just remembered this light, and this quake--"

As if on cue the earth trembled beneath their feet. In the distance he heard the caw and flutter of panicked birds.

It stopped a moment later. Kyra said, "I don't even see the light. The eruption. Whatever it was."

"Neither do I. I saw this stream and thought I could follow it."

"I know. Me too." Kyra looked around the forest. "I know we should search for them, but..."

"I want to get out of this place," Eli said simply, no excuses.

Kyra, more abashed, agreed with a small nod.

"Let's keep following the stream," he said. "If we get a little further, out from the wood... we might get a better idea what's going on."

Kyra didn't look sure of that, but she followed Eli anyway. He could feel she still didn't trust him. He didn't care. He was glad to have her here, even if her Force skills were barely honed. He no longer felt alone and overwhelmed.

They proceeded with the stream for a stretch longer. The forest seemed to be getting less dense; when he looked up he could see more of the star-filled sky. He thought he could make out ridges through the trees and quickened his pace. The fast walk, uneven terrain, and heavy pack combined to

exhaust him but he didn't slow down. When he looked back, Kyra was always right behind him.

And then, just when he was sure they were nearing the forest's edge, Kyra said, "Wait!"

Eli stopped. He looked around and saw fear in her eyes as she scanned the forest. He reached for the lightsaber and asked, "What do you see?"

"There was something. Movement."

"An animal?"

"No. It was humanoid." She turned her head, still scouring. As soon as Eli started looking she gasped.

He followed her pointed finger. In the distance, just black silhouettes among the trees, were the two thick-bodied aliens who had appeared to them in the stone forest. They seemed planted in place, staring at Kyra and Eli but coming no closer.

He reached out and tugged her arm. "Ignore them. Just keep walking."

She couldn't tear her eyes away. He wanted to ask just what those things were, what dream they'd come from and how the harmless old aliens instilled her with such fear.

He didn't get the chance. Other movement tugged his attention to the right and he saw his own nightmare approaching. Five lanky Duros moved nimbly through the woods. He couldn't read them in the Force clearly, but he knew their lethal intent and his lightsaber came to life in his hand. Only then did Kyra notice the newcomers.

"Run," Eli said, and they ran.

They couldn't go far. They were already nearly breathless from exertion, the wet earth sucked at their feet and the heavy packs slowed them even more. The Duros came quickly through the trees and soon were upon them.

Eli turned, dug his feet into the mud, and swung his lightsaber fiercely. He cut through one attacker- maybe the same one Skywalker had cut through in the stone forest- and the Duros simply faded into air. The pack on his back tugged him off-balance and a second Duro came in from the side and punched him in the face, hard, just it had punched his father.

Eli would have fallen to the dirt, but his shoulder hit a tree first. The Duro came at him again but Kyra came up behind

and slammed her pack down on its shoulders. The Duro fell in the mud; more came at them. Kyra, still clasping her pack, swung it wildly and hit another Duro before a third elbowed her hard from behind. She groaned and dropped the back. Eli regained his stead and lunged forward. His lightsaber speared through another body that instantly disappeared. Still three more of them.

Kyra was on her knees and a Duros was coming at her. Eli couldn't help; his feet were stuck in the mud and the other two Duros were charging at him from either side. He thrust out his lightsaber to the right and speared his attacker through. The one on his left grabbed him and threw him hard against a tree. Pain shot through his body and he dropped Skywalker's lightsaber. The flat, huge-eyed alien face loomed over him like it had loomed over his father, emanating hate and promising fatal violence.

Suddenly the Duros shuddered, released Eli, and staggered back. It retched once more and disappeared; suddenly Kyra was standing in front of him, one of Khat Lah's flat-bladed coufees in her hand.

Panting, he looked around. The Duros were all gone. He knew that wasn't the end of it; he had to do something else to make them go away in a swirl of white sparks, as Skywalker had with the specter of Darth Nihl, but Eli couldn't do that, not here and now. He only wanted to escape.

Kyra looked at the weapon in her hand as though surprised by her own actions. Then she stuck it at her waist, tucked between hip and belt.

Finally Eli thought to say, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," she said, then bent low to pick up the lightsaber. She held it in front of her, considering. Then she held it out. "You're better with it than me."

"Thank you," he said again, and took it.

"Now," she said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Agreed."

Kyra checked her pack to make sure everything was inside, then strapped it on. She marched determined downstream, toward the ridgelines still visible through the trees. Eli followed behind her, but not before taking one glance deeper into the forest. Those two alien silhouettes were still there,

only watching. Kyra kept walking, determined not to look at them, but Eli risked a few looks back. After the first few glances he no longer saw them; perhaps because they'd passed too far away, or perhaps the ghosts had dissolved into air, biding their time before another appearance.

They were going to open the door again. Kwa and Yuuzhan Vong were gathering around the hypergate's looming arch. Jariah could feel their anticipation even though he stood too far away to see it in their faces. He hated being bound unwilling to the lives of strangers; it made him feel vulnerable and voyeuristic at once.

The flash of instant insight that had followed waking from that dream- or Force-vision, or whatever it was- had faded somewhat. He stood beside Deliah and could sense her emotions, but not her precise thoughts. The busy minds of those tending the gate were present but unintrusive, like a day of overcast weather. He still didn't like it. He preferred his skies clear and his mind focused on his own problems. Even if this faded further he hoped he could learn to shut it out. He'd heard Cade complain about the nagging, relentless Force for years but never understood it until now.

Cade was on his mind pretty heavily, not just for his uncertain fate, but for the vision he'd seen through Cade's eyes. Lowbacca had admitted that he'd experienced a similar dream, seeing events of his youth on Yavin 4 through the eyes of one of his friends. Lowbacca didn't know why he'd seen that, of all the events in his long life. Jariah had an idea, but he kept it to himself. Meeting Cade and risking Rav's wrath to befriend him had changed Jariah's life in ways he'd never had imagined. He didn't know where he'd be right now otherwise. Very possibly still in Rav's gang. Also very possible dead, and for no better reason than his father. Cade had changed him, maybe even ennobled him a tiny bit.

And now Cade needed help.

With a sigh Jariah said, "You know, I've been thinking, Blue."

"Thinking's good. In moderation."

"How's Lowie gonna communicate with the Vong over there? I doubt any of 'em know Shyriiwook."

"He can point and growl. That gets the point across."

"I mean it. He needs somebody to translate, and they said the droids probably won't work on the other side. Not that anybody'd want to drag Threepio over there."

She sighed. "Jariah... I know what you're getting at."

"I know some Shyriiwook. And some Vong too. And I've got this damn Force me in... be a shame not to use it."

"You don't know how to use it. Which is probably for the best. Not that I ever went into Jedi moralizing, but if you start casting Force powers they'd probably be all dark side." After a pause Deliah added, "Not saying mine would be any different."

"Stop being so relieved," he grunted. "I can feel it coming off you, you know. Just like I can feel all those guys over there—" he waved at the gate, "—getting ready for the big communion. It's the strangest damn feeling..."

"I'm an empath, Jariah. I'm used to picking up other peoples' emotions."

"Yeah. Not like this, though."

She admitted his point with silence.

He knew that if he was going to do this, he'd better act fast. Lowbacca and the Vong team were still in the caves getting their gear packed. He knew where to find them, but his feet wouldn't move. He was stuck between duty and fear.

Deliah, empath that she was, could sense that. Or maybe she just knew him well after all these years. Softly she said, "The worst they could do is turn you down."

"Why'd we come on this trip if it wasn't to help Cade out, you know? We can't help him on this side of the gate."

"If you want to go, then go. Indecision's not your style."

It wasn't, until everything he ever was got upended through no fault of his own. Jariah took the first step, the hardest. "I'll go see if they'll had me."

As he started for the caves she called at his back, "Be safe, dammit. Listen to their advice, don't take any stupid risks, and don't risk your neck for anybody."

"Always good advice," he laughed once. Not very Jedi-like either.

"Seriously. I don't want to be left alone with all these Force-freaks." She said it with a tight smile that wilted fast.

From a certain point of view, Jariah was one of those Force-freaks now too.

He left Deliah behind and made his way to the caves. Lowbacca had a lightsaber on his belt and was stuffing a backpack that looked small on his massive frame. There were four Yuuzhan Vong in the chamber with him, including Xahn Carr and another Basic-speaker he'd talked with called Neshri Buhl. The way all five stared at him made him feel like an intruder.

Don't hesitate, Jariah thought. "I want to go through the gate with you."

"With all respect, Jariah Syn, your powers and new and untrained," Xahn Carr said. "What lies beyond will be dangerous in ways you can't imagine."

"I can imagine a lot of things. Like my brother Cade being in all kinds of nasty trouble. I'll be a coward if I stay on this side and do nothing. Besides, I figure this crew could use a good translator. I can handle Basic, Wook, *and* Yuuzhan Vong. I'm the complete package."

"No one questions your bravery, your honor, or your skills," said Neshri Buhl, "But for your own safety you should stay behind."

Jariah looked to Lowbacca. "If I cared about my safety I'd have ditched this *grancha loco* quest at the start. Come on, *pateesa*. You know I can keep my head in a tight spot."

The Wookiee knew he could, and he also knew all certainties went out the window now that he'd been afflicted with the Force. But Lowbacca gave a confident roar and a nod, and even the Yuuzhan Vong assented to that.

It took less than a half hour to pack. Xahn Carr warned his blaster might not work on the other side of the gate; Jariah brought a primitive slugthrower anyway, and stuffed a vibroknife into either boot as well. The Yuuzhan Vong said that they'd face greater dangers than could be fought with weapons. Jariah didn't care; he wouldn't feel close to confident unless he was well-armed.

When they were ready to pass through the gate it happened like before, but it felt so different. The Kwa and remaining Yuuzhan Vong gathered around the arch. Along with them

were the handful of Force-dull spectators: Jao, Deliah, Talon, all watching with a mix of wariness and longing.

Jariah stood with the rest of the recovery team at the great arch's base. He saw the surrounding Vong and Kwa close their eyes and felt their concentration. He felt something else too, unlike anything he'd ever known. It was like a surging tide of restless energy. It seemed to fill him from the inside and swell around him from outside, both at the same time.

It was almost overwhelming. He wanted to shout as the collected thoughts of all the dozens of beings around him poured into his head filled him up. He felt hot inside, like he could burst through his bones and skin. He felt something else too: the hypergate itself, as bright and powerful as any living being.

In front of him, perpendicular slanting lines of light emerged from the interior rim of the arch. They interlaced, grew wider and brighter, and soon the entire gate was filled with white.

Lowbacca threw his head back and roared in what sounded like exultation. He took a long step forward. The Yuuzhan Vong joined him. Finally, Jariah started walking. The light was on him, it consumed him, and in a timeless instant it transported him far, far away.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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Despite Hondo's aspiration, their position at the trial was not, in fact, front-row. The courtroom spread two columns of twenty benches back from the prosecution and defense tables, and Treis Sinde was posted at the rear-left corner of the chamber. From this angle he couldn't see much of the judges, lawyers, or accused, but he had a decent view of the backs and profiles of the audience. He'd made it a point to study the officials within the new senate and recognized at least half the audience from those rolls. He spotted clusters of representatives from Imperial systems and clusters of Alliance ones, but the groups were sprinkled throughout, and neither one had amassed control over an entire side. He wondered if that was purposeful seating on Sigel's part. The rest of the audience was a mix of government ministers, legal experts and members of the press, plus a few professional-looking but unfamiliar faces.

All of them were watching the front of the chamber with rapt attention. The lawyer for the prosecution- an Elomin named Rakavetech, was giving his oration. Tall and thin with a horn-topped head, Rakavatech also had a deep voice that seemed to boom off the chamber walls.

"What happened here, gentlebeings, was not just murder. It was not just regicide. It was not just treason. It was an act of violence against the very principles on which our Federation was founded. In claiming to act in the name of the Alliance they acted instead for anarchy. Their open defiance of civilized law is an insult to anyone who wishes our galaxy to



remain united. In order to properly heal the wounds left by the murders of Empress Fel and her consort- to say nothing of the wounds left behind by the Sith and fifteen years of savage warfare- we must stand united in condemning their actions.

“Over the course of the coming days we will prove beyond a doubt that Admiral Stazi, Senator Nelloran, Senator Kaige, and the absent Senator Derrol were complicit in those killings. Not only did they collude with criminal elements, they cooperated with the Sith themselves- the true architects of terror- to shake the Federation to its foundations.”

That roused some angry shouts from the Imperial pools, which in turn were met by indignant denials from the Alliance senators. The lead judge began pounding her gavel before things got too out of hand, but it still took a minute to hush the room.

Leaning close to Treis, Hondo said, “The barve sure knows how to get a response. Where’d the Sith angle come from?”

Treis wasn’t going to get into it, not with these men. He was surprised too, but for different reasons. He’d not expected Chalk to drag in posthumous testimony from a Sith Lord he’d already killed; maybe the man was counting on fear of the Sith to unite people in opposition.

Rakavetech rounded off his oration with a few more minutes of rhetoric, big on justice and unity and low on specific evidence, though Treis knew the time for that would come later. As soon as he sat down, the defense lawyer, Homs Ngalen, sprung to his feet.

“Gentlebeings, I come before you today to repel an act of vicious slander,” the Gotal said. “Despite the comments of the prosecution, my clients do not *claim* to act for the Alliance. They do not claim to act for anyone or anything because they did not commit this heinous act. They are and have always been loyal servants of galactic peace. They have been committed to the Galactic Federation since its first day. Admiral Stazi will tell you in his own words about his respect for Marasiah Fel and how he often stood beside her, even in defiance of his own political allies.”

That got a surprising round of applause from some Alliance circles. The magistrate again hammered the audience to quiet,

and Ngalen went on, "Let the prosecution bring its evidence. We look forward to smashing one item after another. We will use reasonable doubt, cold hard fact, and most important of all, the incontestable character of the accused to prove to every being here, even the most hostile, that Admiral Stazi, Senator Kaige, Senator Nelloran, *and* Senator Derrol did not commit this heinous act! And when we have proven our point it is our sincere, deepest hope that the prosecution will cease its political persecution and find those *truly* responsible for the deaths of our beloved empress and her consort."

That earned more applause, which was loud enough to drown out some Imperial jeers. Treis wondered if the whole trial would be like this; if so, it could drag on for months.

Assuming, of course, they didn't succeed in busting this whole charade open.

When he dared think about it, he was shocked by Hogrum Chalk's audacity. The man had faked a murder of his own niece in order to seize her throne and purge some of his political enemies, while at the same time trying to shame his other enemies into submittal. It was a nuanced and dangerous game, and if Treis, Ganner, and their allies got what they wanted it would blow up spectacularly in his face.

As the judges started making a few more statements, Treis caught Sigel Dare on the far side of the room. The woman was making discrete but visible hand signals every Knight had been trained to recognize. She needed to speak with him, now. Treis signaled his affirmative and started for the chamber's side exit, usable only by authorized personnel.

"I think our time has come," Treis muttered. "With me."

He moved quickly along the chamber walls, all three mercenaries behind him. The audience still stayed focused on the front of the room. He worked his way to the exit Sigel had already taken, hesitated a moment, then whispered, "Stand by. I'll signal if want you to follow."

"Understood," Hondo nodded.

Treis took a moment to calm his pounding heart, then types his passcode into the control panel. The door slid open, revealing five bodies already in the chamber beyond: three Imperial Knights and two blue-clothed security officers.

Treis took that as an invitation for his own men, and all four stepped out of the courtroom.

As soon as the door hissed shut and sealed them in the side chamber, Sigel said, "We have an emergency. A Mon Calamari warship has just dropped out of hyperspace. It's holding in geosynchronous orbit over Galactic City."

Treis had known this was coming and practiced his response. He screwed up his face, blinked disbelief, and said, "What kind of warship? Admiral Slossar's? Or is it?"

"Its identification reads *Mon Elusia*, one of the ships from Bey's fleet." Sigel's left cheek twitched, the one stress-sign on that stoic face. "Orbital defense is scrambling to intercept now."

"Have they opened fire?"

"Not yet. We're raising planetary shields now. Once they're up we can trap the ship and destroy it."

"If it hadn't fired yet it may have something else in mind. Has the regent been contacted?"

"I haven't gotten a message from him yet. Master Sinde, I need you to—"

A security officer on Sigel's right, who'd been listening to his earpiece, suddenly said, "Master Dare, word from orbital defense. The Mon Cal ship has started a broadcast going out on all frequencies."

"Can't they block it?" Sigel snapped.

The man flinched. "I'm not sure, Master Dare. I think- one moment." He listened to his earpiece again and his eyes went wide in shock. "Master Dare... They say they have Senator Derrol aboard. They say he's come to take part in his trial."

Though not a shot was fired and no explosions burst in space, *Mon Elusia's* arrival was like a bomb dropped into Coruscant's orbit. Civilian ships veered wildly away while defense patrols swarmed the massive vessel like tiny flitgnats, blaring unheeded warnings.

As the Mon Calamari cruiser settled into direct orbit over Galactic City, a pair of star destroyers stationed at the edge of the system dropped out of hyperspace and began vectoring steadily toward the Alliance vessel. *Mon Elusia* remained

resolute, signaling to anyone who'd hear that Porat Derrol was aboard and ready to discuss his participation in the trial.

The senator stood in the center of *Mon Elusia's* bridge beside Captain Errangar, an old Shistavenen with more gray than brown in his fur. The tall horned Chagrian was an icon of calm confidence to the entire crew, none of whom noticed the anxious twitch of a pinky finger as he folded his hands in front of him. Saaraï alone knew her husband's tells.

They'd played the same message on repeat for nearly ten minutes. The star destroyers were nearly within firing range but had slowed their approach. Porat asked the captain, "Do we know if they've stopped the trial?"

Errangar passed the question to his communication officer, who said, "We're picking up a few news feeds. It looks like the session's been put on hold but not dismissed."

"Are they trying to sequester?" asked Saaraï.

"It's hard to say anything for sure," the lieutenant shrugged helplessly.

Porat said, "We need to send out a new message before they regain control over this situation. Captain, may I?"

Errangar waved at the comm station. "By all means."

After the lieutenant set the message to broadcast on all freqs, Porat leaned close and summoned his most authoritative speaking voice. "This is Senator Porat Derrol, again speaking to you from the bridge of the Federation warship *Mon Elusia*. I did not come here to start a fight. I came as I did to ensure my safety as I negotiate terms of participation in my own trial. I regret taking drastic means, but I need to protect myself.

"I have already stated that I will speak to the magistrates as soon as they are willing to speak to me. Since they have not yet responded, I extend my invitation. I'd like to negotiate with Regent Hogrum Chalk. Rest assured, Regent, you have nothing to fear from me, any more than you have to fear from the truth. I look forward to your response."

He stabbed the button, shutting off the link, and looked straight at his wife. "Too strong?"

"It will be strong enough to get his attention," she said. "That's what we're really after."

"What's the status of the justice center?" Errangar asked.

"No signs of power losses yet, sir," a lieutenant said.

The Shistavenen made a low growl and tapped a button on the comm console. "Rogue Leader, are you there?"

"Snug in my bird and ready to deploy," Anj Dahl's voice sounded faintly. Like the other fighter units, her Rogues were being held in *Mon Elusia's* hangar, prepped and ready for launch on a second's notice.

"Hold position for now. Please confirm that the justice center will suffer a partial power failure."

"Yes, Captain, though not to the courtroom. We've got a Rogue down there. He should get it going any minute now."

That was clearly too vague for Errangar. His fur bristled as he said, "Understood. Stand by."

He took his claw off the button and looked back at the tactical display. Those star destroyers had just entered firing range but the guns were silent, for now. Further away, rounding Coruscant's ecliptic, was a third star destroyer. If they'd have to fight their way out, it would get pretty messy.

Porat's pinky finger twitched rapidly. To the comm officer he asked, "Are you certain the signal's going out on repeat?"

"Yes, Senator, and they haven't been able to jam us. All of the Coruscant's getting our message."

"Except the ones sequestered in the courtroom," Saaraï pointed out.

"They're not our *real* audience," Porat said. "The *people* are our audience. And so is—"

"Senator," the lieutenant said, "We're getting a hail from the ground."

"All right." He took a breath and looked at Saaraï and Errangar. "Stand back, please. I'll handle this myself."

He positioned himself in front of the holo-transceiver while everyone around him got clear. When the connection opened Saaraï saw a blue profile appear, draped in long robes with mechanical prosthetics covering the nearer side of his face. It occurred to her, not for the first time, that Chalk would have made quite a Sith. Not as a warrior like Nihl or brutal sovereign like her father, but as a schemer like Maladi or a tactician like Havok.

The regent said, "These are very dangerous theatrics, Senator Derrol."

"These are not theatrics," Porat said. "I would not have brought this warship unless I was deadly serious."

"You've allied with Admiral Bey then, have you?"

"Admiral Bey carries the true torch of the Federation. But I'm here today because of *you*, Regent. I understand you want justice for your niece but I am *not* responsible for her death."

"Then come down. Send away your threat, sit with the other defendants, and accept a legal trial."

"Not until I have a chance to review the evidence."

Bitterly Chalk said, "A murderer does not get to choose what he stands trial for."

"I am not a murderer. I want the whole galaxy to see how fair- or unfair- your trial is."

"It is not my trial."

"You're right. It's my trial, and the trial of three other Federation patriots. They deserve more than a show trial."

A tactical officer skipped quietly up to Erragan and Saarai and whispered, "Reporting partial power outage in the justice center. It's on."

Meanwhile, Chalk sighed. "This is getting tiresome, Senator. You clearly have no interest in an official trial and I will not bow to threats."

"I'm threatening no one."

"That ship is threat enough. I beg you, Senator, reconsider this course of action."

"This is a warship of the Galactic Federation, the same as those star destroyers. Would you have them fire on one of their own?"

"That is not my decision, Senator. It's yours. If you're not threatening us and are done with your drama, then feel free to leave Coruscant orbit now. I will tell the destroyers to let you pass."

"We are not leaving until we see justice done," Porat said firmly. "One way or another."

"Then by all means, stay where you are and watch the trial proceed from orbit. History will judge you for this, Senator. Stand by and await its verdict."

The holo winked out. Porat scowled and admitted, "I was hoping to keep him stalled for longer."

"We're getting a partial power outage in the justice center," the tactical officer repeated. "Whatever's supposed to happen down there... It looks like it's on."

"Does that mean we've done our part?" the comm lieutenant asked hopefully.

Errangar shook his grizzly head. "Our part is to hold and be ready for anything. Get online with Commander Dahl and the other pilots. Tell them to warm engines and stand by to deploy."

Fifty-six storeys was a long, long way to drop, especially in the dark. The fiberchord cable spun out of its reel automatically but they still had to progress steadily, periodically bracing feet against the lift shaft's interior wall to keep their descent steady. Marin wasn't nearly as young as she used to be, and even using the Force to hasten their descent she began to feel painful burn in her arms.

And then, suddenly, the descent was over. Her boots, dangling beneath her, found purchase and Marin swung her glowlamp to see the round durasteel plate filling the tube beneath her.

With relief she stood firmly on the plate and released the cable. Tes came down a moment later and the younger woman asked, "How many floors did we go down?"

"Fifty-seven." Marin looked at the shaft rising into the dark above them. "We're beneath the levels that are officially occupied now."

"That's a start." The younger woman flexed her sore arms. "Now how do we find the empress?"

Marin closed her eyes and summoned the best tool she had. The Force told her that there were no other beings in the immediate area besides her and Tes. She felt living presence distant above them, but the floors directly overhead seemed empty. When she probed below, she felt nothing at all. Maybe that meant the empress was guarded by droids. Maybe her flesh-and-blood warders were inside the ysalamiri bubble. Maybe Marasiah was already dead and they'd come all this way for nothing.

Only one way to find out, Marin thought, and unhooked the lightsaber from her belt.

It felt weird holding one in her hands after all this time. She thumbed the switch and cast out a perfect white blade, similar yet so different to the yellow one she'd built, killed with, surrendered, and ultimately gifted to Nat Skywalker, who'd died with it on Taivas. Marin moved Ganner's weapon slowly, re-familiarizing herself with its weight and minute heft. She glanced over its humming blade at Tes, who watched a little impatiently.

Very carefully, Marin went over to the lift tube's interior door- welded shut on this floor, she noticed- and began carving a hole through them. Tes stood behind her, slug-thrower hefted and ready just in case, but when Marin carved through the door all they found was a black corridor. The air felt stagnant and when they stepped inside their glowlamps lit up a thin layer of settled dust.

"Where to now?" Tes whispered.

"If they're holding the empress there have to be active power conduits down here. Running water pipes too. We'll probably have to go down several more levels and scope one floor at a time."

"Sounds like a project. Where do we start?"

"We explore this level and work our way down. One floor at a time."

And it was, indeed, a project. Marin and Tes scouted dark corridors, one after another. With every new passage they searched for working security cameras or visible alarms and found nothing. Every door had to be carved through with her lightsaber; none seemed to be receiving power. This was a dead level, and when they found the entrance to a stairwell they immediately took it down a level.

The next floor was the same, and the one beneath it. Marin could feel Tes' frustration but she remained calm herself. The real challenge would start once they found the empress.

After two more floors, they finally found something. They didn't even notice it at first, but when they heard the tinkle of running water running both women turned around, swung their glowlamps up, and found the underside of one pipe cutting perpendicular across the ceiling of the hall. Marin listened very closely and tried to pinpoint the direction the water was running in.



They tried to follow it. There seemed no easy way to follow the pipeline so Marin decided to risk some destruction. She carved through the wall beneath the pipe with her lightsaber very carefully to reveal another narrow hallway beyond. She carved through another wall and chased the pipe further until she found it twist in a right angle and stab straight down into the floor.

"Follow it all the way?" Tes whispered behind her.

"All the way," Marin agreed, and began cutting through the floor.

One more level was all it took. Marin dropped them both down, Force-assisted, into the most spacious chamber they'd encountered yet. Apparently a storage facility of some kind, it stretched for tens of meters in each direction. The ceiling, higher than in the levels above, seemed to have a double-layer that obscured the water pipeline from view. The women split up, swinging their glowlamps to scour the darkness in every stretch of the room.

Marin had stalked about ten meters from Tes when she felt the other woman disappear in the Force.

She swung around and shined her glowlamp on the distant figure. Tes saw light flood in from behind her, turned around, and tilted her head curiously. Marin trotted toward her.

"What is it?" Tes asked in hushed voice. "Do you feel something?"

"No. That's the point." As she stood beside Tes, Marin took a deep breath and tried to depress the button of the inert lightsaber in her hand. Nothing happened. She couldn't feel Tes either, or anything or anyone.

"We're close," she whispered. "We're damned close."

She turned her glowlamp in the direction Tes had been walking. She saw only a plain wall ahead, but Marasiah and her captors had to be close. She trotted straight to the wall and ignited the lightsaber with a twitch of the thumb.

"You're going to carve right through?" asked Tes.

"I don't see a door, but I can make one."

"Are you *sure* the empress is in there?"

"Only one way to find out."

Marin stabbed the lightsaber into the wall. The superheated blade turned metal molten and she began to cut her way

deeper. Despite losing the Force she felt a confident thrill; it had been a long time since she'd worked a lightsaber and even longer since she'd felt like a Jedi, but that was what she felt like now. Her goals were clear, her cause righteous; she'd forgotten what that felt like but it was coming back to her now.

But she couldn't get ahead of herself. Marin carved a narrow hole through the wall and stepped through it. Tes came in right behind her. Their glowlamps swept across another large storage chamber, but this one was different. A second chamber seemed to have been placed inside this one; the second had curved walls and a lower ceiling, and several pipelines and power cables could be seen connecting to its roof from the main chamber's ceiling. Marin didn't see where the ysalamiri were being kept but they must have been close, perhaps in the levels directly above and below.

Then her eyes caught another light: the steady winking of a red diode located beneath a security camera. She didn't have the Force to blur it but Tes had the next-best thing. When Marin pointed, the younger woman lifted her slugthrower and fired off a shingle shot, mostly muffled by the thick barrel. The camera shattered and the diode went black.

"That should tell them we're here," Tes said. "Better act fast."

Marin did. She went straight to the circular chamber. When she couldn't spot a door on this side she ignited her lightsaber again and began carving through. This wall was thinner than the other ones she'd cut apart, and apparently lined with inward-facing light panels. As she cut, they sparked and went black, but she could spot more lights shining along the wall of the opposite side.

After cutting a succinct circle she and Tes reared back and delivered a strong double-kick that knocked the carved-out portion to the floor of the chamber beyond. Still holding a buzzing saber, Marin went through the gap, Tes right behind her.

What she saw surprised her. The circular chamber, three-quarters of its walls still luminous, was a modest but comfortably furnished apartment. She saw sofas, chairs, a dining table, a nook for a refresher, even a small kitchen.

And she saw, standing with her back pressed against to opposite wall, a single woman. Anyone who'd seen the empress on holo-broadcasts alone wouldn't have recognized her. She wore only a loose white tunic, the kind you saw on hospital patients. Her long brown hair was a mess of tangles that half-covered her face, and the one eye Marin could see was framed by dark bags. Her hands were held up defensively and Marin could see bruises on her knuckles, as though she'd been punching something hard repeatedly.

That one haggard eye locked on Marin's lightsaber. Slowly the hands lowered and the face lifted. In a rasping voice Marasiah asked, "Who the devil are you?"

## Chapter Twenty-Four

It was only when they found the stone forest that they realized everything had changed.

After escaping the lush woods and their lurking ghosts, Kyra and Eli climbed ridges that seemed to match to the ones they'd descended from. The plan, both agreed, was to start back toward the hypergate while keeping an eye out for any sign of Cade or Khat Lah. They'd walked around the edge of the forest but found nothing. The red sun was almost gone from the sky and the myriad stars were growing brighter. Their light, no longer blood-colored, was less menacing and soothed Kyra's nerves.

When they climbed partway up the ridge they stopped and looked back. The great pillar of light, which had sprung from the heart of the forest and guided them on their long journey from the gate, was gone. The most they could make out was a dark pit from which, perhaps, it had sprung.

They marched further up the ridge. Tiredness hit them both hard and they agreed to make camp. Kyra was still a little wary of Eli, but through the Force she could tell he was as scared, confused, and lonely as her. She didn't trust him, but she was grateful not to be alone in this strange place. Dimly, she could tell he felt the same.

Despite everything they both slept soundly. When they woke up the red sun was returning on the opposite horizon; she still didn't know how long day and night lasted on this world. Time never seemed constant. They proceeded over the

mountain ridges, talking little, watching every shadow and cliff for ghosts that never came.

She knew those two old Jeodu would come back, and she didn't know how to make them go away, but right now those worried her less than Eli's murderous Duros. After waking she checked the place where she'd been hit to find a purple bruise welling. Those phantoms could kill unless Eli found a way to banish them. She wanted to ask what they were, if only because it might help her figure out how to banish them, but she sensed Eli wouldn't talk about it any more than she'd talk about her Jeodu. Though they were in this fight together, they were still facing ghosts alone.

After wakeup it didn't take them long to cross the highest ridge and begin their descent toward the forest of stone trees. That was when they started to realize what had changed. The eruption they'd followed was gone, but new pillars of light stabbed toward the sky. From high elevation they could see at least seven, some small and faint, others seemingly closer.

"I don't understand." Eli's breath was fast and shallow. "How many of those were here when we came?"

"Only a few. Maybe... that one. Those two." She pointed toward far-away ones. "I don't know what Skywalker did... but it's like he made more eruptions."

"Then where *is* he? And where is Khat Lah?"

She felt a flush of shame for leaving the forest without fully searching for their companions. "I don't know," she said in a small voice.

"Do you remember the path back to the gate?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

He nodded. "Do you want to keep going?"

Kyra didn't know what she wanted. She didn't know if they had the power to open the gate ahead and she didn't know if Khat Lah and Cade even existed behind them. For all she knew the two of them, experienced and trained Force-users, had dissolved into that primal energy, ascended somehow, leaving the two apprentices to fend for themselves.

The thought brought awe and terror. She swallowed hard and said, "Let's go down."

They went down. As they approached the stone forest she could tell something was different about it; the right sunlight

didn't fall so harshly on its gnarled branches. When they finally reached the trees it took her breath away.

The trunks and branches were still stone, immovable even in the wind that swept through the forest basin. Yet blossoms were bursting on every tree, spreading out wide thick leaves. Eli experimentally cut off one branch with the lightsaber and found it petrified straight through; nonetheless, it was blooming.

"I don't understand," he said. "This is impossible."

"I don't think that's a word we should use for this place."

"Maybe not," he admitted, "But the flowers... they're not growing out of anything. They're just... growing."

"Khat Lah says the Force is raw here. A whole forest, a real one, popped out of nothing back there. With all those new eruptions, maybe there's more life in the air."

"That doesn't make me feel much better. The kind of life that comes from here..."

"I know." She looked at the forest. With flowers spreading it cast darker shadows than ever, with only jagged slips of red light falling to the ground. Despite the strange new life, it promised the same dangers as before.

"We could try to go around," Eli said.

"Khat Lah said that could add another day or two."

"What does that even mean in this place?"

She didn't know. She'd lost count of how many rotations of stars and red sun they'd been through and had no idea how many standard days had passed. But for her bruises and hollow stomach this could have all been a dream.

"We can try to stay in the foothills," she said. "Skirt around the forest."

Eli looked relieved. "That's fine by me."

It was slow passage around the slopes that rimmed the flowering woods, but better than going through that haunted place. Just being here brought memories of the last encounter and both of them kept looking at the surrounding ridges and the stone trees below. Nothing appeared.

When they set down to sleep again they agreed they should keep watch. Kyra, still anxious, agreed to take the first shift. Eli lay down in his bedroll and slept. She waited, watching him for signs of his old nightmares, but they seemed to be

leaving him alone. Maybe they'd just shifted to his waking hours.

Once she was certain he was asleep, Kyra wandered a little upslope, to a spot where she could sit down and watch both Eli and the forest. Then she took out Darth Traya's holocron.

The old woman materialized in front of her. That crisp, stern voice said, "You have returned to me. Good. What guidance do you seek?"

She'd retrieved the device without fully knowing why. Cade and Khat Lah, mentors she trusted, were gone, maybe forever. Jao and Lowbacca were on the other side of the gate. This dead old Sith had knowledge; dark knowledge, but maybe something still useful.

Kyra considered and said, "I feel like I'm being... hounded by the Force. I need to get control over it somehow."

"Your voice trembles. You sound as though you desire escape."

"That's not possible right now. The Force isn't going to leave me alone."

"Please, tell me what is happening to you."

She couldn't explain a situation she didn't understand herself. "We're being chased by our own nightmares. My companion and I. Fighting them doesn't get rid of them. I just want them to go away. I want to be in *control*."

"Control is something the Force denies you at every turn. It works its own will and constructs its own design. Mortal beings such as us are mere instruments, unless we choose to be otherwise."

"I choose. Tell me what I have to do to be free from all this."

She expected some talk about seizing control by embracing anger. Instead Darth Traya gave a more measured response. "You must find a place in your heart that is resilient. Find that inside which gives you strength to endure and hone that strength into a weapon you can turn against the Force."

Kyra tried to think back to her worst days of debt slavery on Socorro. She'd endured those through hope and stubbornness; she wasn't sure how either would help her here. No; she'd endured but she'd also escaped, and that help came through Ania and Jao. They, too, were far away.

“True strength always comes from within,” Traya continued. “And I will tell you one thing about the Force. Though it constantly seeks to bend you to its will, it is not inviolable. Focus on that inner strength. Harden it inside you as pressure and heat create a diamond, and if you succeed you will become unbreakable. Then the Force will begin to bend to *your* will.”

Pretty words, but Kyra didn’t see how they could help her here. “I don’t think I have that kind of strength.”

“If you lack strength it is no one’s fault but your own. Likewise if you fall prey to your fear you have only yourself to blame. Are you a coddled child?”

“No,” Kyra snapped. She’d been anything but and was insulted by the suggested.

“Good,” Traya said approvingly. “Focus on the hardship you have endured in your life thus far. Meditate on your triumphs and take them to heart. If your will is strong enough, the Force around you will bend to reflect it. Control your inner self, and you control the Force.”

She said it so forcefully, and despite her confusion Kyra felt a chill of conviction. In this strange place, where the Force was so malleable, Traya’s words were even truer than she realized.

“I’ll consider that. Thank you,” Kyra said honestly.

“Do not thank me. Do not feel you are obligated to me at all. I am long dead, and these are merely my words as I chose to preserve them. Think of yourself alone: your strength, your endurance, your desires, your will. Only by controlling what lies within can you control what is without. If you seek more advice, come to me again.”

Traya’s image dissolved to light and fell back to the holocron. Kyra cupped the inert pyramid in her hands, thinking. Cool wind blew over her. She felt she was on the verge of understanding something, but didn’t know what. Whoever this dead Sith was, she seemed to like it when you figured things out for yourself. That wasn’t the help she was looking for, but it was all she had.

After thinking for a while, Kyra stepped carefully down the slope. Eli was still asleep and she crept past him to her bag and placed the holocron inside. She scanned the forest and



the ridges. Nothing moved and nothing came for them, not yet, but it would again. Somehow, she'd have to be ready.

Lowbacca thought he was prepared for anything, but what he found on the other side of the gate stunned him. It wasn't the strange barren landscape, the sporadic groundquakes or the sky packed with dying old stars. It was the Force itself. He could feel it roiling all around him like a sea during a storm. Pillars of light sprung at intervals from the horizon, and though they were distant they whispered of immense raw power.

He wasn't the only one surprised. Even the Yuuzhan Vong were taken aback. Xahn Carr explained, "It is as we feared. The Force has been disturbed here. It is breaking through the skin of the planet."

"And what the kark does *that* mean?" Jariah Syn asked. From his tone he instantly regretting crossing over.

Xahn Carr pointed out several light pillars. "None of those were visible the last time we came to this world."

Lowbacca asked a question, and Jariah said, "Do those things pop up a lot?"

"They have never changed that I have seen," Neshri Buhl said.

"Well, what the hell are they?" Jariah asked. "They feel.... powerful."

"They *are* powerful. Khat Lah was taking your companions to one of them..." Neshri Buhl scanned the horizon, "But that light appears to have gone out."

Lowbacca roared another query. This one didn't need translation.

"We have no idea why," Xahn Carr said. He scanned the horizon with narrowed eyes, then pointed to one light-pillar. "That one feels closest. Come. We will approach and examine it."

"You must be ready for anything," Neshri Buhl added. "Stay alert."

With that cryptic advice, the Yuuzhan Vong led the march. Jariah Syn kept glancing back at the hypergate arch, like he wanted to jump back through, but he kept trudging on. As they walked the two Basic-speaking Yuuzhan Vong

explained how Khat Lah had spent years exploring this planet, charting its terrain and trying to communicate with the Whills at the light-pillars. Millions of years ago, they said, this planet and others had been just like Zonama Sekot, with a communal consciousness spread across the entire sphere. Eventually that consciousness gained such communion with the force that it was able to voluntarily merge with it, shedding all physical life that had once been here. Nonetheless, echoes of its immense Force power remained, and Khat Lah believed it could serve as a bridge between their plane of existence and the higher one of the Whills.

Walking around the alien landscape and feeling the strange currents in the Force, Lowbacca believed it. Belief unnerved him all the more. He was facing an unknown, possibly unknowable power; worse, he did not trust his companions.

Jariah Syn was a rogue of questionable morals suddenly granted unknown abilities, but he worried Lowbacca less than his guides. It was a shameful thing, one which he'd never mention aloud, but a part of him was still revolted by Yuuzhan Vong.

He was one of the few remaining Jedi who'd lived through their initial invasion. He'd seen them kill close friends and butcher entire planets for their imaged gods. He knew that they had changed much in the past century but it was impossible not to look at Xahn Carr and Neshri Buhl and see the monsters who had traumatized his youth. Jedi were not supposed to cling to old prejudice and hatreds, but no Jedi was perfect.

When he'd stepped down as leader of the Jedi Council Lowbacca had said it was to allow new blood and new ideas. That was technically true; the truer reason was that Kol Skywalker had gathered broad support among the Jedi for the Ossus Project and its collaboration with the Yuuzhan Vong. Unlike Kol, Lowbacca couldn't bring himself to trust the one-time invaders. As Jedi Council leader he'd have to either stand in the way of the project or stand down. Often since he'd wished he'd chosen the former option, though not for reasons he'd imagined at the time.

Yet these were the companions he had now, the only other beings in the galaxy who could use the Force. He did not

enjoy having such strange bedfellows. It was often said among Wookiees who travelled the galaxy with shorter-lived species that your first friends remained the best long after they were gone. For Lowbacca that was true; of all the Jedi he'd known in his career he found himself longing for the help of his oldest friends: Jaina and Jacen, Tenel Ka, Raynar, Zekk.

Maybe that was why he'd seen them in the Force-vision that had accompanied his waking. E'Lorem had explained that when the Force awakened inside you it showed the pivotal moment in your life, the one that most made you what you were today. Lowbacca had seen the moments before the attack on the old Jedi Praxeum at Yavin 4 by the Shadow Academy. He'd seen it through Jaina's eyes and marveled at himself- still young and lanky, with a rich auburn pelt- and more he marveled at how determined the rest of them were. They were Jedi under siege but they'd stood together, fearless, certain in their cause and the heroic Jedi future awaiting them if they could defeat the perils ahead.

He'd almost forgotten that moment after over a century, but it came back so vividly he'd known it was a gift from the Force. Lowbacca tried to cling to that memory of devotion and purpose now, when everything was so confused.

They trekked for many hours, mostly in tense silence. While most of the landscape was absolutely barren they passed a few places where fresh trees or shrub seemed to have sprouted out of nothing. The Force, Xahn Carr said, could summon life out of nothing here, but he'd never seen growths like this, far away from any eruption.

In time the stars in the sky were joined by a fat old sun that beamed blood-red light onto the landscape. It made for a discomfiting view and Lowbacca found himself wishing for night. The group was getting tired, and Xahn Carr suggested they make camp and sleep. Jariah was the first to agree.

They found a low hill to lay out their sleeping rolls. Neshri Buhl volunteered to keep first watch; what they were watching he didn't say. It struck Lowbacca as especially strange; they hadn't seen any sign of other beings here or even animal life. It was one more disturbing element and he

struggled to sleep, despite being very tired. His big body twisted on the roll, from one side to another. He couldn't feel comfortable and couldn't rest; dull red sunlight kept trying to pry his eyelids open.

He was, therefore, more or less awake when Neshri Buhl nudged his shoulder, saying, "Master *Jeedai*, wake up. Wake up now."

With an annoyed grunt, Lowbacca pushed himself upright. Another Yuuzhan Vong was waking Jariah; the others were already on their feet and, he saw with dismay, gathering weapons. Lowbacca took his lightsaber from his pack and looked around the surrounding area. He saw a small group of figures approaching: seven or eight humanoids wearing what looked like bulky, jagged armor. As they drew closer, he made out familiar bare skulls, slanted foreheads, and spiked shoulder-pads. The amphistaffs writhing in their hands were the last give-away. Yuuzhan Vong, somehow, had resolved out of the blood-red day.

"Tell me those are some of your pals," Jariah whispered.

"They are not," Xahn Carr said simply.

"How can you be sure? Where else would they come from?"

Instead of answering the four Yuuzhan Vong on the hilltop spread into a loose semicircle, imposing themselves between Lowbacca and the newcomers. The Wookie growled and thumbed his molten-gold lightsaber on. He barked a simple question: Were they under threat?

Their Yuuzhan Vong didn't reply. The others broke into a sprint and began charging up the hill. Xahn Carr and his warriors lifted their own amphistaffs and raced down to meet them. Lowbacca ran as well, understanding nothing, only knowing he'd have to defend himself. Behind him, Jariah swore harshly.

The fight on the hillside was dreamlike. The attacking Yuuzhan Vong moved like swift shadows through red light. The attackers seemed to lack definition; their faces were featureless blurs and their armored bodies never seemed to focus in his vision. They were like specters from dreams, but he was not dreaming.

Lowbacca evaded the lash of one amphistaff and punched his attacker in the stomach; pain shot up his fist as it impacted on vonduun crab armor. Another Yuuzhan Vong came at him from the side and when Lowbacca swung his lightsaber it seemed to pass easily through the creature, which in turn vanished into air. He heard the crack of a primitive slugthrower and saw the skull of another Yuuzhan Vong shatter; before the body fell it, too, dissolved to nothing. From atop the hill, Jariah Syn recoiled his pistol and took aim again.

Xahn Carr and his fighters battled well. They danced with the specters, parrying amphistaff strikes and making thrust of their own. One of them took a cracking blow to the head and fell; Lowbacca rushed his attacker and speared it through. It, too, disappeared.

The surreal fight lasted mere minutes. Then all the attackers were gone and they were alone on the red and dusty plain. Neshri Buhl bent over the fallen warrior, feeling his skull. The warrior was protesting in Yuuzhan Vong, probably claiming he was fine.

Jariah trotted down the hill, pistol still at his side. "*E chu ta!* Where the hell did those murglacks come from?"

Dreams, Lowbacca roared. He understood now why these Yuuzhan Vong and E'Lorem had so cautioned him against coming. The line between his self and the outer world was no longer firm.

Xahn Carr nodded gravely. "I told you already, Master *Jeedai*. Life springs from nothing here. And sometimes the dead, too. They will not be back for some time, but they will be back. I suggest we start moving again."

The stone forest wasn't the only place touched with inexplicable life. It took Eli and Kyra a long time to circle around the woods but eventually they found the path they'd descended from days ago. As they began crossing the hills they noticed dry scrub sprouting from bare stone that hadn't been there before. A few flowers bloomed at random, turning colorful pedals toward a bloody sun.

Eli cared less about those than a return of his nightmares. He still didn't know how to deal with them, though he'd

wracked his brain on the long march. Skywalker had apparently had the will and wisdom to banish Darth Nihl's ghost but Eli had neither. Khat Lah had talked like Eli needed to reject his hate toward the people who'd killed his father. It was such a Jedi-like thing, encouraging peace and detachment and the surrender of ego, but like most Jedi platitudes it was easier said than done.

Sometimes, as he marched, he thought that he didn't even *want* to surrender his pain. That suffering had made him who he was and erasing its strain from his heart would erase the person he'd become. Other times he wanted to erase himself; the Force no longer intruded in his dreams but when he slept he still felt echoes of all the people he'd murdered for the sake of Sith vanity. These ones, thankfully, fled on waking, but they still drove in the foolishness of his choices and the cruelty of the Force.

He was going in circles inside himself, getting nowhere. The next time he and Kyra made camp, he said to her simply, "Tell me about your ghosts."

She stared at him across the low warm burn of the fire-stick. They were nestled on a hillside ledge, with a good view on the plain they'd descend to tomorrow. She asked, "Does it matter?"

"They won't leave us alone. Nothing matters more."

Kyra looked at him and past him, into deeper memory, but she said, "You first."

Eli had expected that. Leaning against the stone behind him he turned eyes to the stars. "Those Duros killed my father. I saw them through that first dream, the one that awakened the Force in me. I saw it through his eyes. I felt them kill him."

Just speaking of it made his heart smolder. Kyra could hear the hate in his voice. Cautiously she asked, "Your father was a Jedi, wasn't he?"

"He sacrificed himself at Duro. He threw himself at an angry mob- a mob he'd done everything to help- just to we could escape. He thought they wouldn't kill him..." Eli's lip twitched in a snarl. "Jedi were always naïve... They never thought they could be hated."

After a while Kyra asked, "Do you hate your father?"

“What? No. Never.”

Even as he said it, Eli wondered if he did; hated him for being naïve, for throwing his life away and leaving a son behind. His father had embodied Jedi selflessness in his mind, and he’d come to hate that selflessness. Self was always more than you thought it was, and in giving of yourself you gave up those around you.

As if to assure himself, he said, “I hate the ones who killed him. Wouldn’t you?”

Kyra didn’t answer. Instead she said, “The ones I’ve been seeing... they killed my parents too.”

It was hard to imagine that old, unmoving, seemingly-harmless pair of aliens as killers. “Why don’t they attack us?”

“Those Jeodu didn’t attack my parents. They were just... in the way.” Her eyes narrowed. “The Empire killed my parents. I only remembered that when they had the dream. It was a bombing run by TIE fighters on our city.”

“But you blame those Jeodu.”

“I didn’t remember them either until that karking vision...” She ran a hand over her forehead, through her hair. “I wish I’d never come to this place.”

“I know. So do I. I wish...” He wished he’d realize the gift he’d been given. According to Skywalker, Darth Maladi had called the Force’s silence liberation. She’d been right. He should have embraced his freedom but instead he chased after new chains.

Neither of them talked for a while. They were both lost in deep thoughts and old pains. Eventually Kyra asked, “Do you think we’ll ever see them again?”

He understood that she meant Skywalker and Khat Lah. “I don’t know. Maybe the Force... took them away.”

“We should have stayed in the woods. Looked for them longer.”

“Maybe,” Eli admitted. “But we could have gotten killed in there. We had to go and we have to get to the hypergate and open it.”

“If we can open it.”

He nodded. “We’re on our own now. We have to look out for ourselves.”

It was practical and callous remark; he also believed it was true. Sith training had still left a mark on him even if he no longer thought of himself as one.

Kyra's training had been less thorough and more noble, but she nodded too. There was only one direction they could go.

When they woke next, they began working their way toward the plain. The slope was still dotted with random brush, occasional flowers, and a few gnarled trees. Each plant seemed of a different type; Eli thought he recognized a few, and they were all from different worlds he'd been to. Maybe they were shaping these bursts of life just as they'd birthed the nightmares. The Force here was waiting to be formed, and willingly or not they seemed to be forming it.

The greatest confirmation yet came halfway down the slope. Eli heard fast scraping behind them, claws on bare rock. He turned to see a creature on an outcropping behind them, looking down. It was felinoid, four legs, long tail, a smooth brown pelt. Jaws opened to reveal canines but no sound escaped its mouth; it was as silent as the Duros that harried him.

"Get back!" Eli called and reached for the lightsaber.

The creature sprang off the rock and fell on them. Kyra tried to scramble away but the creature's right paw slashed her arm. She cried out, spun, and fell. Her pack fell off her back and tumbled further, rolling down the hill.

Eli dropped his own bag quickly, ignited Skywalker's blade, and assumed a defensive stance. The feline spun on him, tail twitching, limbs tensed to pounce. Eli recognized that creature, and it had no business being here. Not that that stopped anything else.

He was ready to slash, but the creature stayed where it was. He reached out with the Force and felt its hunger, as authentic as any living being's.

"You don't want us," he whispered, and tried to convey those thoughts to the animal.

"What are you doing?" Kyra groaned, "Cut it down!"

The creature twitched like it was about to leap, but held its place. Eli tried to tell it they meant no harm; they were scared and confused and hungry like it was, and like it they just wanted to be away from here. He felt a slight tug of



empathy from the animal and something more: the desire for release.

*Just be gone*, he told the creature, *And we'll be gone too*.

And before his eyes, the creature burst into a swirl of luminous motes that circled upward like an insect swarm and joined the dense starlight above. Eli, uncertain of what he'd done but relieved beyond words, shut off his lightsaber.

"You did it," Kyra gasped. She was still on the ground, clutching her shoulder. "You... banished it."

"I just... told it to go away. And it listened." He wished those other ghosts could be so easy, but he felt like he'd made an important step.

"What the hell was that?" Kyra asked.

"Corellian sand panther."

"You've seen one?"

"No, but my family's Corellian. I've heard stories, seen holos..."

"So you're conjuring local predators now? Great."

"It's not like I'm doing it on purpose."

"I know, I know." She looked at her arm and winced. The claws had torn the sleeve of her jacket and the skin beneath, drawing blood from four long slashes. "Please tell me they're not poisonous."

"I think they are, actually."

"Oh, fierfek..."

"They didn't cut deep and I think it's mild in small doses. I know we packed some antitoxins..."

She looked down the slope. Her bag had fallen some ten meters, and Eli could see several items had spilled from it.

"Stay here and don't move," he told her. "The less your blood flows--"

"The less the poison travels. I know."

Eli gave her other arm an encouraging squeeze, then began to step carefully down the scree. He picked up a few food items on the way, then the bag itself. He looked around as he stuffed the food inside and found a medical kit. Sitting on the slope he took it out, prided it open, and found one capsule of antitoxin. He hoped it would be enough.

As he stuck the kit back in his hand nudged something smooth and hard. Fingers grabbed it and he pulled it out. His

breath stopped when he realized what it was. Eli glanced frantically over his shoulder; Kyra was still on the ground and out of view. He had no idea where she'd gotten a Sith holocron but it was clearly that, and as he held it in both hands light emerged from its edges and became the image of an old woman with face hidden by a hood.

"My name is Darth Traya," she said. "For what purpose do you seek my knowledge?"

The name was vaguely familiar. Darth Talon had never been big on history lessons but he remembered the Sith associated with that title had been unorthodox and untrusted by other Sith.

Eli wanted to throw the damn thing as far as he could and break it against the rocks. He knew better than anyone what Sith promises were worth and he'd be doing Kyra a favor. The young woman had so little training and she was just discovering her powers anew; he understood now that she had an undercurrent of anger and resentment not unlike his own. She needed to be kept clear of the dark.

He should have thrown it away, but vague curiosity tugged at him. He wondered what she'd have to say. Maybe a just a bit of it could help them survive this strange place, and he believed he was better fit to see through Sith lies than Kyra. If she ended up spouting the usual dark side pablum about embracing your hate, he'd cast the thing aside. But he wanted to hear it first.

Eli stuffed the holocron in his pocket and hoped its bulge didn't show. Then he collected the last stray items, put them in Kyra's bag, and carried it back up the slope.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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Marasiah couldn't believe the sight in front of her. Closer was an old woman, tall and thin with gray hair pulled back in a tight bun. A pure-white lightsaber hummed in her hand but she was no Imperial Knight- that at least was certain. Behind her, a younger woman with short auburn hair, a business-woman's skirt and jacket, and what looked to be a primitive slugthrower pistol clasped in two hands. They'd carved their way into her prison, shorting out the lights on one stretch of curved wall. Beyond the circular, still-sparking portal was darkness, and perhaps freedom.

Marasiah stood with her back against the wall, as far from the intruders as could be. Without the Force she had no idea who they were and no idea of their intentions. "Who the devil are you?" she croaked.

The old woman extended a hand. "Empress Fel, we're here to rescue you."

"Who *are* you?" she snapped.

The old woman hesitated to answer, and the younger woman said, "Empress, we have to go now, before somebody comes to stop us." She wagged her pistol at the hole in the wall. "That's not gonna go unnoticed and this is the only weapon we've got."

That wasn't true. Marasiah's eyes locked on the other weapon. "That lightsaber. Where did you get it?"

"This is a loaner," the old woman said, "From Ganner Krieg."

Hope warred with skepticism. "Where is Ganner? Is he here?"

"He's our ride out," said the young woman tersely. "Come on. We can't keep him waiting."

Marasiah didn't move. She didn't know how this might be a trap of her uncle's but it *could* be. Hogrum was cunning in ways she'd never expected. She couldn't trust anyone; not these strangers, not even herself.

"Empress, *please*," the younger woman said. "We need to go. Now."

Then a second opening appeared. The door her uncle used to come and got through slid apart, but this time two humanoid droids stomped into the chamber and raised wrist-mounted blaster cannons. Marasiah, still frozen against the wall, watched as the younger woman dropped to her knees and popped off two quick shots from her pistol. The long barrel muffled the blast but her bullets took the nearest droid in the head. The first blast impacted its chromium skull, and the second popped its photoreceptor in a shower of sparks.

The older woman was already moving. The second droid fired a volley of red laser blasts but the woman flicked her lightsaber fast to deflect one; the second skimmed her shoulder, scorching clothing and flesh, but a third bullet popped that droid's photoreceptor as well. The old woman, wincing through her pain, lunged forward and thrust her lightsaber into the chest of the droid who'd shot her. She pulled it out easily, spun on one heel, and took down the second droid with a horizontal slash through the torso.

Both machines clattered to the floor. The younger woman looked to Marasiah and said, "*Now* can we go?"

Marasiah pushed herself off the wall. She pulled tangled hair out of her eyes and looked down at her loose tunic and bare feet. She'd had no shoes since her captivity started.

"Empress, *please*," the old woman extended a hand again.

Marasiah didn't take it, but she hurried toward the opened door. The younger woman went out first, pistol hoisted to fire. The older woman came out next, lightsaber hefted. Marasiah followed them out into a large, dark storage chamber. There was another door on the far wall, some ten meters away, and her rescuers started toward it. The perma-

crete was cold and hard under her bare feet but Marasiah ran after them.

"Where are we?" she asked, "On Coruscant?"

"That's right," the older woman said. The door opened automatically for them. As they stalked down a long corridor toward another door she said, "Tes, want to call Ganner and tell him we have the package?"

"I can try." The younger woman fished a comlink out of her suit-jacket.

Marasiah pressed, "Where are we? Galactic City?"

"Government district," the older woman confirmed. "Underneath the Department of Transportation tower."

The younger one winced. "Can't get a message through. We might need to get outside."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Marasiah. "Do you have an exit strategy?"

"Kind of." The younger woman pocketed her comm. "We're trying to take you out the same way Chalk gets in. Most of this part of the building is powered-down and the path to his landing pad is probably the only part still working, so if we keep moving--"

She stabbed the controls to the door they'd reached. Marasiah heard the faint whirr of an approaching turbolift. She glanced at Ganner's lightsaber, still buzzing in the older woman's hand. "You look like you know how to use that."

"That's good to know," she muttered vaguely.

Marin stared at the old woman, who was staring at the door. She felt intense concentration from the woman with suppressed anxiety beneath, but a different kind of anxiety than she felt from the younger one.

With a quiet gasp, Marasiah realized she could use the Force again. It gave her a feeling of hot triumph but not safety, and the warmth quickly cooled. The Force hadn't prevented her from ending up in that prison; it might be no good at getting her out either.

Her rescuers raised their weapons, ready to strike when the lift doors opened. Sure enough, there were two more battle droids waiting. Even before they opened fire, an invisible wall knocked the droids off their feet and crashed them noisily into the wall of the lift. The old woman lunged

forward and in a single swing of the lightsaber cleaved both apart. The younger woman lowered her gun, grabbed Marasiah's wrist, and dragged her into the lift.

Marasiah stumbled over cut-up droid parts and nearly fell into the wall. The door closed behind her and the lift whisked them downward. Marasiah fumbled around and stared at the old woman.

"That was the *Force*," she said hoarsely. "How... Does that mean Skywalker succeeded?"

"Not that I know of, but I heard he's making progress."

"Then I don't understand.... Who *are* you?"

The old woman glanced at Ganner's lightsaber, then back to Marasiah. "They used to call me Marin Fel, a *really* long time ago."

*Mon Elusia* should have been the center of attention as it hung over Galactic City, but Saarai was starting to feel like a mere spectator. She could tell the restless crew was feeling the same way. After Hogrum Chalk had brusquely shut off their communication, things had reached an impasse. Three star destroyers and innumerable support craft surrounded *Mon Elusia* but none opened fire. The Mon Cal cruiser was re-broadcasting its initial message in an endless loop, but no one was even attempting to reply.

Neither Porat nor Captain Erragar were ready to try and leave Coruscant orbit. There was no telling how the destroyers would react, and more, it might damage the empress' rescue operation, which was apparently underway right now. They were monitoring the news-nets and there was no report of disturbances in the government district. The trial had apparently been put on short-term suspension, with the audience and accused behind held in the courtroom while the magistrates met to discuss the new development.

Saarai greatly hoped the magistrates would try and talk to Porat directly. They might even open a dialogue, instead of repeating Chalk's dismissal. Her husband stood still in the middle of the bridge, projecting confidence, but again she could see his tells. He was less nervous than impatient; his right foot tapped soundlessly on the deck, marking a restrained urge to pace.

The bridge's awkward silence was broken with the sound of a tactical officer clearing his throat. "Captain, Senator, sir? You might want to see this."

Saarai followed them to the tactical console. The holograph showing ships over Coruscant remained unchanged; the man instead directed their attention to his console screen, which showed from-orbit views of Coruscant's surface. Even in the shrunken image, Saaraï recognized the ordered layout of the government district.

"Sire, we're picking up anomalous energy readings. Lots of thrust signatures just appeared over the government district, especially around the courthouse."

"Chalk must be allocating more security," Porat reasoned.

"I'm not sure, Senator. It's hard to tell from this distance, but the signatures look like starship drives, not the airspeeders they normally use for patrol. And there's a *lot* of them. Sirs, I think-

"Sirs," came a call from the comm station, "You need to see this now!"

By the time they got there, half the bridge crew was staring at the holo-projected news broadcast they were picking up from the surface. At first Saaraï refused to believe what she was seeing. The familiar skies over the government district were alight with explosions. A few darting shapes dipped close to the camera: one TIE Predator, being chased, with two CF9 Crossfires on its tail. The Crossfires- the most iconic starfighter of the Galactic Alliance- released a flurry of laserfire that blew the TIE out of the sky.

The starfighters disappeared from view. The camera panned, then zoomed on the distant drum of the justice center. Some of the crew gasped as a flight of Crossfires swooped down and released concussion missiles that impacted on the building's frame.

"What the devil are those ships doing?" Porat gaped. "They're not ours! Are they?"

"They are *not*," Errangar snapped. "Comm, send a new signal! Tell everyone those are *not* our ships!"

Porat and the captain hurried back to the comm station, but Saaraï still stared at the news broadcast. Initial shock was giving way to understanding. *Mon Elusia* could proclaim all

it wanted that those Crossfires were not its own, but the trillion citizens of Coruscant and the trillions more following the situation across the galaxy would see an Alliance cruiser over the capital and Alliance starfighters strafing the city and come to the obvious conclusion.

Understanding gave way to bitter admiration. This attack would be roundly condemned as the work of Bey's rogue fleet. Alliance die-hards would be demonized and the Alliance loyalists in the senate would be forced to cooperate with Chalk. Without even meaning to, they'd planned into his hands. Yes, the man would have made a frightfully good Sith.

Saarai wanted to pull Porat aside and explain this to him if he hadn't grasped it already, but things were moving fast. As soon as he got to the comm station the lieutenant there started explaining that a new call from coming in from the nearest star destroyer, demanding that they cease the attack on Galactic City or be destroyed.

"Tell them we have nothing to do with that!" Errangar snapped. "They've been watching us this whole time! They can see we haven't launched fighters! They've had shield's up over the city, for fierfek's sake!"

"Sir, they're not responding!" the comm lieutenant warbled.

From the tactical station someone called, "They're launching TIE fighters!"

Another said, "Incoming turbolasers, aft-starboard!"

Their shields were up and the bridge didn't even rock as the energy screen absorbed the first volley, but there would be many more and *Mon Elusia* was outgunned three to one. Errangar barked, "All weapons, return fire! Helm, try and plot us a course out of here!"

"Those destroyers have us boxed in tight," Porat said as Saarai came to his side.

"Then we'll have to push out hard and fast. Tactical, tell the hangar to launch all starfighters. I want every bird we have in space."

"Yes, Captain!"

"Even if we send them all at one star destroyer they might not be enough," Porat wanted.



"They won't be," the Shistavanen growled, so quietly only Saarai and her husband could hear. "But we have no choice. It's fight or die."

Or, Saarai thought, most likely both.

Anj Dahl's crossfire exploded out of *Mon Elusia's* docking bay and flew into a maelstrom. Laser volleys lanced through space and waves of missiles trailed swathes of exhaust as they arced down onto the Mon Cal cruiser's shields. Rogue Squadron, fresh out the gate, was well clear of the impact zone but Anj was still rattled in her cockpit by the concussive force.

As she got clear of *Mon Elusia* she banked to port and looked out her cockpit bubble. The cruiser was being slammed on all sides and its shields wouldn't hold for long, but Captain Errangar wasn't going down lightly. *Mon Elusia* had angled its nose toward the nearest star destroyer and was already opening fire with all forward batteries. The space between the two behemoths was alight with plasma volleys and it was clear Errangar had planned to smash through that destroyer before the other two could press in on his flanks.

That was a bold gambit, one more than likely to get the ship destroyed, but it was all they could do. Anj didn't know if the destroyers had offered them a chance to surrender before shooting, but mercy no longer seemed an option.

"I don't get it!" snapped the pilot on Anj's wing. "What the hell happened? Why are they shooting?"

She'd gotten only the barest sketch before being sent out into the fray. "Something's going down on the planet. They say there's Crossfires shooting up Galactic City."

"What? Where'd they come from? They can't be ours."

"I have no idea," Anj grunted and checked her scanners. The other starfighter squads were swarming toward that first star destroyer, clearing intent on pounding it for all it was worth. Clusters of Crossfires flew cover for groups of BB-2 heavy bombers and old D-wing attack fighters, and for the moment they seemed to have the TIEs at bay.

Anj was torn. If they didn't kill that destroyer *Mon Elusia* was doomed. It was probably dead even if they succeeded. But even more important than that one ship was what was

happening in Galactic City. She didn't know where these other Crossfires had come from- maybe some reckless pro-Alliance militia, maybe even mercenaries- but even they were less important than the operation to rescue the empress. Anj knew the basic sketch of the plan, and she knew extracting Marasiah Fel would be a hell of a lot harder now that the air over the government district had become a warzone.

She flipped on her comm and tried to hail Ania Solo. No such luck, but that wasn't surprising for the jamming and energy scatter up here. The only way to find out was to get closer to the surface, probably beneath Galactic City's shield dome.

"Leader, what are our orders?" a pilot asked.

Anj glanced at her scanners again. The Rogues were holding back but the rest of the fighters had joined the attack on the destroyer, and the enemy TIEs were currently racing to intercept. The big capital ships had joined battle in full, and even from a far distance her eyes caught warheads pushing through shields and tearing flaming gashes in the hides of both ships.

It was an ugly desperate fight, and twelve Crossfires could help a lot.

They could help even more in Galactic City. Anj jerked her control stick, wrestled her fighter away from the fury, and pointed her nose toward the planet below.

"All Rogues, on me!" she called. "We're diving!"

"Leader, what about the fight?"

"There's another one waiting for us down there! We might even find out who set off this mess. Let's go!"

She pushed engines to full and began her plunge. She checked her scanners and saw with relief that all her pilots were forming up behind her. Most of the TIEs were busy in the main brawl but she knew they'd never get all the way to Galactic City unmolested. This was going to be a bumpy ride.

Her comm signal lit up with another hail: *Mon Elusia*, probably calling to ask what the hells she was doing. She was about to answer when she spotted the first flight of TIEs on an intercept course and primed her laser cannons instead.

When this was over, if they survived, she'd explain this to Jhoram Bey himself. If anyone would understand, it would be another Rogue Leader.

Laserfire flashed dead ahead of them, followed by the engine-flare of a passing Crossfire. Shado twisted the throttle and slammed the reverse-thrusters, killing acceleration and nearly throwing Ganner into the viewport to avoid a pack of TIE Predators chasing the Alliance fighter. The ships whipped past and for a second Ganner felt elation; then gravity seize them and they started to drop.

Shado, face wrenched in a grimace, started engines again and pulled the throttle back. As they soared skyward Ganner was pinned to the back of his seat, but once they hit level altitude with the highest surrounding skyscrapers Shado levelled them off.

Ganner waited three heavy heartbeats and they were still alive. "Sithspawn," he gasped, "I guess you can still fly."

"I guess I can," Shado said with no joy in his voice.

They'd just kicked off from Eastport after getting the signal from Tes Vevac when the sky lit up with dozens of explosions. He had no idea what was going on; local security was blaring warnings on every channel, saying that Galactic City was under attack and all civilians were to stay grounded. That certainly wasn't part of the plan, and Ganner wasn't even sure if those Crossfires were from Admiral Bey's fleet, but the ferocious dogfighting was certainly authentic. Swarming ships and explosions were thick around the government district and especially around the drum-shaped judicial complex.

As Shado put them on a course for the thick of it, Ganner looked to the seat behind him and asked, "Holding up back there?"

"Barely," Sauk said. The Mon Calamari had gotten back to *Starlight Champion* just in time for takeoff and was clearly regretting it. "Can we contact Ania?"

"It's time to find out." Ganner tapped the comm console and tried hailing *Free Agent*. Comm channels were as messy as everything else right now and all he got was static.

“Keep trying,” Shado said, “I’m going to take us in for a low approach.”

He dropped altitude as they approached the government district. Starfighters were dueling high above, sometimes blasting each other out of the sky, and Shado had to swerve out of the path of a falling Crossfire. They were coming in from the north and approaching the transit department tower; fighting clouded above the judicial center just beyond, and even over the bulk of the palace.

“This is insane,” Ganner rasped. “How did it get like this?”

“All I care about is getting the empress and getting out,” Shado said. “Sauk, you know where the docking pad is, right?”

“Yes, southeast side.”

“So we have to swing around closer to the judicial center. Great.”

Shado twisted them into a broad port turn so they’d circle around on the landing pad from the east side. He began to increase altitude and Ganner turned the comm system to Tes Vevec’s frequency. “We’ll be there in a minute. Are you standing by?”

“We’re at the landing pad,” the woman replied. The transmission was marred by static or background violence. “Hurry up!”

Maybe it was both. “Understood, hurrying up.”

He killed the comm just in time for Shado to throw them into a hard starboard turn. The entire ship rocked and alarms wailed.

“Are we hit?” Ganner asked.

“Just the shields. They’re holding for now.” Shado swerved them again and checked his sensors. “Sithspit, they’re on our tail. Two TIE Predators.”

“Why are they shooting at us?” Sauk squawked.

“I don’t know! Why is anybody shooting at anybody?” Shado growled frustration as another series of blasts hit their shields. “Somebody has to have guns, right?”

“I have guns,” Ganner said as he swung on the weapons console. He’d never fired them before, not from this ship, and as he tried to figure out the controls more laserfire rocked the cockpit.

Shado shouted, “Now, please!”

“I’ve got it,” Ganner said as he depressed the fire button. The shots went wide and he struggled to track the TIEs that were slipping around behind them.

Beside him Shado breathed, “Oh, this is *not* fair.”

“What’s not fair?” asked Sauk.

“Another incoming, TIE Neutralizer. I think they’re after us.” Those were heavy attack craft, loaded with proton torpedoes and equally capable of bombing runs and tackling capital ships.

“Guys,” Ganner said, “I think somebody knows what we’re up to.”

A half-dozen more security droids blocked the way from the prison to the landing pad, but six machines had little chance against two of the galaxy’s last Force-users. Marin handed Ganner’s lightsaber over to the empress and she made good use of it. Marasiah was younger, stronger, and better trained, and with the Force as her ally she deflected laser blasts and cut down one machine after another. Marin would have been heartened by the site, were it not for the black angry pall in the empress’s Force aura.

There was no time to worry about that now. They reached the landing pad Hogrum Chalk used for his special visits and looked out on chaos. It seemed like a full-scale war had come to Galactic City, and from what Marin could tell the worst of it was focused on the judicial center. She couldn’t believe Admiral Bey’s people were trying something so brazen, so damaging, but she could think of no other explanation for what was happening here.

The awful sight almost distracted the women from two more battle droids. They came up from behind and took shelter behind the frame of the hangar entrance, spitting out laserfire at three figures on the jutting pad. They had little places for cover themselves but Marasiah had the lightsaber and she wielded it ably, deflecting shot after shot. Tes’ slugthrower was running low on bullets but she tossed her comlink to Marin and did what she could.

Tes had said their ride was coming in, but Marin couldn’t spot *Starlight Champion*’s familiar shape in the fray. She

tried to call but got no response, and she was about to try a call to Ania in *Free Agent* when Marasiah cut down the last droid.

“Done,” the empress announced. She spun on bare feet and padded back across the pad, lit lightsaber dangling at her side. “Where is Ganner?”

“I can’t get him on the comm,” Marin said. “He might be in trouble.”

Tes’ eyes went up and she said, “Scratch the *might*. Look!”

Marin and Marasiah followed her gaze. The sight made Marin’s heart sink into her chest. *Starlight Champion*, instantly recognizable for its long slanted wing and five thrust engines, trailed black smoke as it cut across the sky. Two ships were trailing it and spitting out green laserfire: one TIE Predator and one heavier TIE Neutralizer. As Marin watched, the bomber fired a proton torpedo. *Champ* twisted to evade and spat laserfire from its after cannon but the torp’s proximity sensors triggered and detonated the warhead. *Champ* fell straight out of the sky, then lurched back up, but with more smoke trailing. Marin could see only two engines still working.

At that moment the death of her ship, which she’d inherited from her father Arlen, seemed as terrible as anything else happening right now.

Then *Champ* gave a sharp twist- that Twi’lek Jedi at the helm must have been good- and its rotating canon managed to clip the Neutralizer in the wing. The TIE shuddered and tried to veer off; *Champ* spat out more laserfire that pierced through its cockpit and sent the bomber falling. It tumbled out of view and impacted on the cityscape below, along with whatever warheads were left in its magazine. As Marin’s ship started jerking toward the landing pad, the whole skyscraper trembled.

“Time to get the *shab* out of here,” Tes said and waved both arms.

*Starlight Champion* slowed and pivoted so its slanting wing faced the city and its opening landing ramp faced the pad. Marin could see Sauk hanging from one hand off the landing strut, stretching out his other. The sounds of wind

and warfare drowned out his voice but she could tell he was urging them on.

"You first, Majesty," Tes said and gave Marasiah a shove between the shoulders.

The empress charged ahead and made a long Force-assisted jump onto the ramp. *Champ* kept nudging closer and Tes jumped on next. Sauk grabbed her hand tight to help pull her aboard. Marin took a breath, summoned the Force, started to run in preparation for a jump-

-and then a TIE Predator came out of nowhere and blasted *Champion*. With its shields down there was nothing to stop the laser bolts from shearing off its bottom wing and spinning the ship out-of-control. For a second its hull scraped against the landing pad, sending up a shower of sparks that burned Marin's hands as she threw them over her face. The jarring impact knocked the landing ramp; Sauk held onto the support strut and Tes held on to Sauk, but Marasiah had nothing for purchase. She tumbled through the shower of sparks, back onto the pad, which itself groaned and tipped from the weight slammed into it.

*Champ* bucked the other direction; its engines sputtered and it started falling. Marin raced to the pad's rim and in time to see her ship's engines- just two left- sputter to life. The TIE Predator was still on it, pummeling it mercilessly. *Starlight Champion* had no chance and its pilot knew it. The ship dove toward the cityscape below, juking when it could to evade laserfire. Her eyes traced it as it fell and fell, trailing smoke and fire. When it crashed into a far-below rooftop and skidded across the flat duracrete surface she knew a part of herself was lost forever.

Back in the tower she'd almost felt like a righteous young Jedi again. Now all her failures came back to her like a punch to the chest.

Suddenly the platform dipped beneath her feet, nearly throwing her over the edge. She fell to hands and knees and looked back; half of the pad had been ripped free of its connection to the skyscraper and its own weight would send it tumbling down soon enough. Marin pushed to her feet and staggered to Marasiah's form. Before she got there the younger woman opened her eyes and struggled to stand.

“The ship,” she moaned, “Where is the ship?”

Marin clasped her shoulder tight. “It’s gone.”

Marasiah pushed hair out of her face. “You said there was a backup. Can you call them?”

Marin pulled out the comlink and tried to hail Ania. Static. She tried to hail *Champ* too. Still nothing. The pad shifted beneath them as it tipped toward the abyss, and she squeezed Marasiah’s arm tighter.

“Let’s keep moving,” she said. “We’re on our own for now.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

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As Eli had promised, the sand panther's poison left Kyra feeling weak and nauseous, but it didn't kill her. He suggested they make camp and wait for her to get her strength back but she insisted they continue the march. She started to regret her stubbornness not long after; her legs got weak, her head swam, and a few times she had to stop for the dry retching in her stomach. If she'd eaten anything besides fruits and rations bars she might have vomited.

Despite it all they kept moving. They were still pretty certain they were following the path back to the gate. The broad plain they moved across was dusty and dry, and no plants dared peek through the crust here. That was slight relief; as far as they could tell, their ghosts seemed more likely to appear where there was other life.

The next time they made camp, Eli kept watch and let Kyra sleep as long as she needed. Time was still slippery here, but when she woke up starry night had passed into bloody day. She felt lightly fevered but no longer as sick as she had the day before. After letting Eli take a few hours' nap, they pressed onward. She found she was coming to trust him, if only because she had to trust someone.

The light-pillars still stabbed up from various points in the horizon. One seemed to lie ahead, perhaps close to the hypergate. She suggested that, perhaps, they should check out another eruption before they tried to active the gate. Eli gave a noncommittal response; she could tell he wanted to get out of here more than anything and she didn't blame him.

The next time they slept it was beneath the red sun. Still the barren plain and still no ghosts. Once again Eli let her sleep first, and when she woke up she felt almost back to normal. As he rested she changed the bandage on her arm, and then ate some rations. Watching the lights on the horizon she thought about Darth Traya's advice, if you could call Sith wisdom that. Control within meant control without; Skywalker had shown that before, and even Eli had attained some manner of it by banishing the sand panther.

It was still so hard for her. She'd endured a lot of things in her life but she'd merely endured them; the only real triumph she could name was her escape from Socorro and that had come through the help of others. She thought on those people who'd saved her. She thought on Jao's patient teaching and Ania's empathy, Sauk's aching heart, even AG-37's mechanical composure. And she thought of Skywalker, wild and brave and in his crude way kind of wise. Those people had given her strength; what she needed was to internalize it and make it fully her own.

She thought on those things, and decided she needed a little more advice. Kyra opened her bag and fished for the holocron. She couldn't find it. Heart beating fast she emptied the bag piece-by-piece and still it wasn't there.

She hadn't noticed that thanks to the past days' illness, but the reason was obvious. Her pack had tumbled down the cliff after the sand panther attack, spilling some contents. Maybe the holocron had fallen far and been lost. Maybe Eli had found it and taken it for himself.

She watched his sleeping body and tried to sense stirrings of thought in the Force. None came. Quietly she went over to his bag, opened it, and slowly searched. It only took a minute before her fingers caressed the pyramid's smooth sides.

She immediately pulled her hand back and looked back at Eli, still asleep. She stood up, stalked away from the bag, and stared out at the red landscape. Anger and indecision wracked her heart. She'd started to let herself trust Eli but that was been stupid; she was mad at him for deception and herself for being weak.

She couldn't decide whether to confront him or not. It could spark a fight they couldn't afford. They still needed each

other to pass through his place, and when her anger calmed she saw the only way forward was to pretend she hadn't realized what he'd done. She'd pretend she still trusted him and hope he didn't notice the lie in the Force. And she'd keep an eye on him to see if Darth Traya nudged him back on a nasty path.

When Eli woke they spoke little and got moving again. They marched together across the plain, over low hills and through shallow troughs. Sometimes distant groundquakes reverberated beneath their feet and she wondered if they were emanating from the eruptions.

One quake was strong enough to knock them off balance. They recovered separately, without reaching for another. They gathered themselves and turned to the course ahead, but something had changed. Seven figures marshalled on the horizon, five tall and lanky, two wide with conical heads.

"I was wondering when they'd show up," Eli muttered.

Kyra stared at them. She was used to her Jeodu standing like statues but the aggressive Duros were coming no closer either. "Why aren't they moving?"

"I don't know." After a heartbeat he added, "We can try going around them."

"Do you think that will work?"

"There's only one way to find out."

Reluctantly, she followed him as they walked a wide arc around the ghosts. The Jeodu and Duros seemed to pivot to watch them but did not move closer. Soon the ghosts were behind them. They continued warily, frequently glancing over their shoulders at the sentinel figures.

"I don't get it," Kyra muttered, "What are they doing now?"

"I don't know."

"We shouldn't have gone around. We should have confronted them."

"Are you ready for that?" Eli's voice shook; he clearly wasn't.

Kyra wasn't ready but she'd never know if Darth Traya's advice was worth anything if they kept running. When she next glanced back she saw the plain empty behind them.

"They're gone," she said.

Eli looked too. "I wonder for how long."

They turned ahead and got their answer. The seven figures were planted on the ground some thirty meters away and not moving.

"Do you want to go around again," she asked, "Or do you want to get it over with?"

"I guess we should get it over with." Eli took Cade's lightsaber in hand. "Just in case," he told her.

Kyra nodded and removed Khat Lah's coufee from her belt. Together they walked toward the waiting nightmares and tried to feel brave.

The approach seemed to take forever. It was enough time for them both to reach into the Force. She could feel Eli struggling for acceptance or resignation; he was trying to surrender the lifelong hate he felt for the figures ahead, and with it the desire for violence and control, maybe even the Force itself. Whatever Darth Traya had been telling him it didn't seem to be awakening his latent Sith, and that gave Kyra comfort.

She couldn't reach for the same. If she'd embraced surrender she'd have stayed Rav's debt slave on Socorro. She held to the things that gave her strength and those things were people. She remembered the feelings they'd shared, the confidence they'd given, and the doors they'd opened. In her heart she resurrected the joy she'd felt after escaping Socorro, clung to it and let her fill her heart.

When she approached the ghosts Kyra felt confidence and strength within, and hoped it would be enough to overcome the dangers without.

Distance shrunk. They were twenty meters away, ten, five. The old Jeodu couple stared directly at her but the Duros looked at them both. They raised their fists; a few drew knives. She could feel Eli tense. He stopped in his tracks and hefted his lightsaber defensively, ready for another fight. He wasn't going to let go of his ghosts today.

Neither was Kyra. She knew that, but despite the danger she felt confident, because he was strong within and therefore strong without.

A gust of wind rushed her from behind. Then she heard a noise: feet pounding fast on hard earth. She and Eli dared

and look back and saw figures running toward them. They were shadows, half-formed, moving across the red landscape like oil streaks in water. Eli pivoted and held his lightsaber toward them. As if in reply, a glowing blade of the same emerald shade extended from a shadow's fist. Another blade appeared from the figure beside it; the glow was pure white.

Kyra gasped. The shadows were on them; Eli swung wildly but she didn't even move. The shadows slipped through them and past them and fell upon the Jeodu and Duros.

What they watched next was a strange spectral play. A shadow with the shape and green blade of Cade Skywalker charged one Duros and slashed him through, turning him to mist. A shadow with Jao's white sword speared through another ghost, and a smaller shadow in the shape of Ania dropped to one knee and fired a spectral plasma-burst into the chest of one Jeodu, then another.

There weren't her friends, she was certain of it. These were wraiths conjured from the inchoate Force around them and shaped by memory and desire. Just as she could summon nightmares, she could summon sweeter dreams. Strength within brought strength without, and as Kyra watched the shadows cut and blast away their enemies she felt like she knew every slash and shot as it happened. They were like puppets moving on strings and she could feel every tug; maybe she was moving those strings herself.

It lasted only a few seconds. The seven ghosts disappeared from the plain and the shadow-forms of Cade, Jao, and Ania turned to face her. Their phantom eyes lingered on her for a moment; then the wind blew and they dissolved like smoke.

And then Kyra and Eli were alone on the plain once again.

It was a long time before Eli could think of something to say. He didn't even try to ask what had happened. He merely said, "Do you think they'll come back?"

"I don't know. But if they do... I'll be ready for them."

She said it and she believed it. Her heart swelled with triumph as sweet as the escape from Socorro. She looked around at the bare landscape, the star-packed sky and the far-off pillars of light, and for the first time she was glad she'd come to this strange place. It had unlocked the power within her.

Now, finally, she was learning how to use it.

The moment Jariah had first spotted those spectral Yuuzhan Vong- warriors with blurred faces and blurred movements, like something from a dream- he knew they were one of those things he'd never understand and didn't want to. But he was stuck here, so he figured he might as well listen to somebody try to explain.

"The Force is so raw here it bends to the will of any sentient who passed through," Xahn Carr said as they sat on the ground that evening. Jariah had never seen a sky so packed with stars. "Whatever Cade Skywalker did to this place, it has become more raw and powerful than ever. And, I think, dangerous."

"How do you know it was Cade that did this?" Jariah asked. Aside from the weird light-pillars in the sky they'd been getting low-intensity groundquakes at increasing intervals.

"He is a Skywalker. He carries a piece of the Chosen One inside him," Xahn Carr said, which explained absolutely nothing.

Lowbacca roared a question, and Jariah translated, "Why did Yuuzhan Vong, of all things, attack us?"

"The Force here reflects what it finds in unquiet minds," said Neshri Buhl. "When we first crossed the gate, we were all assailed with dreams where we saw the turning points in our lives through the eyes of another. For many of us, our dreams were made manifest in the waking world."

Xahn Carr added, "On Khat Lah's guidance, many of us took solitary pilgrimages across this world. We communed with ghosts on our own terms. Most of us found a place to accept them in ourselves. Some did not." His expression darkened. "Those ones did not survive."

"So those dreams can really kill?" Jariah looked at the warrior who'd taken a heavy knock to the head.

"Of course dreams can kill," said Neshri Buhl. "Few things kill as much. If we had time, I would counsel you and *Jeedai* Lowbacca to deal with them in solitude, but we do not have that luxury."

"Hey, those weren't *my* ghosts... Were they?"

"I think not," Xahn Carr said. "That vonduun armor has not been worn in a century. Those were frightful specters, assembled from memories of... our older selves."

He looked at Lowbacca sidelong. The Wookiee lowered his head and Jariah finally got it. Lowbacca had fought in the original Vong War and still carried fear and anger a century later.

Which, Jariah thought, made the current setup a little awkward.

"Well," he muttered, "Can't wait to see what *my* ghosts look like."

"For some, those who already have an inner peace, they do not appear at all," Neshri Buhl said. "We all hope you are one of those."

Jariah had never thought of himself as a guy with much inner peace, or outer peace for that matter. "Well, if anything spools out of my head, I hope it's at least a *little* friendlier."

"You are new to the Force," added Xahn Carr. "Lowbacca is a *Jeedai* Master with much experience and great power. The things to emerge from him are naturally greater. That is why we were reluctant to take him here."

"Well in that case, I'm glad I'm a loser with no talent." He glanced at Lowbacca. "Hope you find that inner peace soon, *pateesa*, because I don't wanna face any more ghost armies."

The Wookiee moaned sad agreement.

"Normally they appear only when close to an eruption," Xahn Carr added. "But now that the Force is so volatile... I cannot say what will happen."

It was hardly the kind of thought to go to sleep to, but they all tried to get some rest as the dim red sun arced over the sky. Time was weird here; day felt darker than night and every rotation seemed longer or shorter than the last. The Yuuzhan Vong had said they were on some world in the deepest of the Deep Core, near the galactic center and so packed-in by stars and stardust that it was impossible to reach via hyperlanes. It made him long for Rohakalla's lightless night.

They were awoken again, not but attacking wraiths but by a groundquake. It was more violent than anything they'd felt before; the ground shook so much none of them could even

stand. It lasted for a few long minutes, and as it finally ended Jariah heard a thunderous crack, as though the surface of the planet itself was breaking.

Then he saw it. Less than two hundred meters away a rift had been torn in the dusty plain and a pillar of light speared out. It seemed smaller than the one they were chasing, and the white glow flickered unsteadily.

Xahn Carr sprung to his feet. "Hurry! It may collapse!"

The Yuuzhan Vong were off running. Jariah and Lowbacca exchanged looks, confirming that neither had a clue what was going on, then followed. The long-limbed Wookiee quickly outpaced the others but slowed to a halt as he got near. Jariah quickly learned why. The area around the rift, which had surely been dry plain a minute ago, had suddenly sprung up with grasses, flowers, even a few sprouting trees. They'd all burst to life in an instant from fallow ground, born from the fountainhead of life that flickered ahead.

Jariah found he was scared, and he lingered behind the others as they approached the plume of raw Force energy. It seemed to escape from the planet's body itself. There was another, smaller tremor, and the pillar flickered again, like its light was about to be snuffed out.

That was when Cade appeared. The light flicked off, then back on, and suddenly Jariah saw the unmistakable body of a human with shaggy-blond hair, bare tattooed arms outstretched. He was floating in the light, suspended in it. Jariah shouted his name and raced forward.

Neshri Buhl caught him with an arm across the chest. "No! Stop! It will destroy you!"

Jariah stared at Cade. He seemed to flicker with the light-pillar, there one second, gone the next. "What the kark happened? What's he *doing* there?"

Before they could answer there was another quake. The earth groaned and the crevasse through which the light had shown suddenly closed, sealing the power away and sealing Cade too.

"Damn!" Jariah snapped. "Can someone tell me what the hells is going on?"

"We have attempted to enter eruptions before," Xahn Carr said. "The bodies of those who dared touch it were torn apart,



shredded by the Force. Khat Lah believes a powerful enough *Jeedai* might be able to endure it, even merge with it and speak directly to the Whills who ascended from here.”

In a flash of anger he grabbed the Yuuzhan Vong by the collar. “You used my brother as a karking lab rat? Is that it?”

Lowbacca roared for calm, and Xahn Carr said, “If Cade Skywalker stepped into the light it was by his choice alone. Clearly he was able to merge with it in some way.”

“Then how do we get him back?”

“That is why we sought to reach and eruption.” He raised an arm toward the light-pillar they’d been marching to. “That one is stable. We may get close to it, feel it in the Force, and see if we may remove Cade Skywalker safely. But as you are now, Jariah Syn, you can do nothing for him. I am sorry.”

With a frustrated growl he released the Yuuzhan Vong. The other warriors, who’d put hands to weapon, relaxed. He stepped back from them all and looked to the ground. Some of the plants, lush a moment ago, were already starting to grow brown and dry.

He turned his eyes to the light-pillar that had been their destination from the start. For the first time since getting afflicted with the Force, Jariah knew exactly what he needed to do. A calm, maybe a little Jedi-like, settled over him.

“Well,” he said, “What are we waiting for? Let’s get a move on.”

After the battle between specters Kyra pressed ahead with greater assurance, but Eli was more confused and afraid than ever. He didn’t know how she’d summoned those wraiths shaped like her companions; by her own admission she’d didn’t understand either. When he’d faced the Duros from his nightmares and even the sand panther, he’d been able to feel them in the Force as though they were truly present. He hadn’t been able to sense Kyra’s fighters at all. It was as though she’d summoned and commanded an army of golems.

That terrified him. Kyra was untrained, fumbling along with her newfound power. It could easily spin out of control and so could she. As her spectral figures had cut through the nightmares he’d felt an immense and savage satisfaction from her in the Force. It was not merely enjoyment of

victory; it was love of the power she wielded and its ability to strike down enemies. He'd let that same love seduce him and lead him into the dark. Kyra wasn't on that side yet but she had the potential, he could feel it, and without guidance there was no telling which way she'd tip.

He was scared for another reason, too. If she could raise that much power, a trained Sith Lord or a Jedi Master gone dark could command so much more.

This place was dangerous beyond words. They should have never opened the gate.

When they next rested after the fight, Eli volunteered for first watch. Kyra lay in her bedroll, perfectly still, but he could tell she wasn't asleep. Maybe she was still energetic from her victory, or maybe she was listening for what he did next.

She'd have surely noticed her holocron was missing by now. She's said nothing but he was sure she suspected him of taking it. Even before the spectral fight a chill had fallen between them. She hadn't confronted him about it, perhaps because she wasn't sure. So he waited for a long time and kept sensing her prone figure with the Force. When he was pretty certain she was asleep, he got the holocron out of his pack and walked twenty meters from the camp, where he'd be able to talk in private.

He'd consulted the holocron the night before, and when the image of Darth Traya appeared the old woman said with surprising warmth, "Welcome back, young apprentice."

"I'm no one's apprentice," he reminded her, as he'd done last time.

"Yet you seek my knowledge anyway." Her smile had a touch of cruelty. "You must be desperate."

He was. Eli felt he was at another crossroads, the second of his life. The first had been when he'd felt Darth Nihl's saber against his neck and begged to join him.

"I'm not a Sith anymore," Eli said, half to himself, "But I'm not a Jedi either. I can't be." Even before coming here he'd seen and done too much.

"Names are shackles. You are to be congratulated for throwing them off."

"Then what *am* I? I wish I could be free of the Force, but..."

"You are cursed with it, but you might as well use the power you have."

"I... suppose you're right."

Darth Traya was, indeed, unlike any Sith he'd ever known. She spoke of the Force as one would a cruel god, giving words to the feelings that had been brewing inside him.

"Tell me what you seek," Traya said. "Make it clear. Give me a single word."

He wanted many things, but she was forcing him to dilute them to their purest form. Eli thought about it hard. He wanted to escape this place, but even if he got back to Rohakalla the Force would still be with him. He wanted understanding, but he knew the powers here operated beyond what a mortal mind could know. He wanted purpose, but he'd had purpose twice before and been trapped by Sith and Jedi both.

He remembered what Darth Maladi had told Skywalker, and he found his word.

"Liberation," he said. "I want liberation."

"There can be no liberation from the Force. As long as you use it, you are its pawn."

"Even if you're strong enough?"

"Even then," Traya said regretfully. "You may sometimes use the Force, but no Jedi, Sith, or mortal can ever have true command of it."

He exhaled. "I still want it. Liberation."

"It is a noble goal, perhaps the most noble of all. Sometimes in striving we can achieve much, even should we fail. Yet how do you seek it?"

"I don't know," he said, but even as he did some ideas were forming in his head.

"You stand on the verge of becoming something great, yet you waver," Traya said with fresh scorn. "I cannot help you if you do not help yourself. Step back. Examine your possibilities. Decide the one what will be liberate you from the Force."

"It's not that easy." Not even an ancient Sith could understand what he was going through now.

“Very well,” she snorted. “If you wish to be a coward, then be one. Hide and hope history never finds you. Wither away and become nothing. Apathy is death.”

“Then chose to act. If you find the strength inside to do that, summon me again. If not, I have nothing more to say.”

The holocron went dark in front of him. Eli sighed again. He didn’t know how much longer they had to go until they reached the gate. Some of those light-pillars seemed eerily close, perhaps even nearer than the arch. He revolted from them. He wanted to get to the arch and through it and never come back to this place. He wanted to seal all its hideous power away from the galaxy as it had been for millions of years.

He wanted the Force, its cruel will and false promises, to simply disappear.

Eli looked at the dark holocron in his hands for a long time. Eventually he went back to the camp, put it in his bag and lay down for sleep with neither dreams nor nightmares.

When Lowbacca first saw the thing approaching he thought it was another nightmare made real. This time it was just a sole figure; something about the shape of the body and gait told him it was Yuuzhan Vong, and his heart beat faster. He’d been wrestling guilt over the apparitions that had appeared, trying to sooth the fear and anger that had been simmering inside, barely noticed for a hundred years. It was bad he’d not been able to shed them, and worse that his inability was endangering good beings.

When Neshri Buhl raised his amphistaff and joyously called Khat Lah’s name, Lowbacca felt weak with relief. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors trotted eagerly across the plain. The Jedi and Jariah followed. When they got close they saw the grey-haired warrior was dirty; his clothes were torn in some places, and he wavered on his feet. He had no pack on his back, and he might have been travelling days without food or water.

The other warriors knew this, and they immediately sat him on the ground and plied him with rations and drink. Khat Lah swallowed gulps of water slowly, like one recovering from great thirst, then began nibbling on a nutrition bar. As

he did so the other Yuuzhan Vong began explaining what had happened on their side of the gate. Khat Lah was surprisingly unsurprised to see the Force had awakened in Lowbacca and Jariah.

When he regained some strength, he started telling his story. He'd talked about how he, Cade, Kyra, and Eli had approached what he called the Great Eruption, and the other Yuuzhan Vong nodded in recognition. He said they'd bound a fiberchord cable to Cade Skywalker's belt as he'd stepped close to the light, but it had proven useless. When Cade got close and communed with the power there the light had flared brighter and consumed him. A great quake had thrown Khat Lah off his feet. When he woke up he was in the surrounding forest, separated from the others, and the light had gone out.

He'd searched the forest and found neither Eli nor Kyra. He'd trekked for days across lonely terrain, encountering nobody and nothing except for the bursts of flowering plant life that had appeared like raw life leaking through the planet's cracks. Once he'd thought he'd seen something in the far distance: a skirmish, with many moving forms. When he'd caught up to that place many hours later he'd found skirls in the sand, perhaps a drop or two of blood, but no dead bodies.

He'd worked his way back toward the hypergate but had been drawn toward the fresh light pillar that had sprung up nearby. As he'd drawn close he'd spotted their party, also on approach. And that was where his story ended.

"Do you think we can find Cade there?" Jariah asked. His concern for his friend was singular; Lowbacca knew he cared nothing for what this planet signified.

"An eruption appeared before us yesterday," Xahn Carr said. "It was short lived, but we saw *Jeedai* Skywalker suspended in the light."

Khat Lah looked to Lowbacca. "Are you certain? Did you feel him in the Force?"

Lowbacca barked an affirmative. During the short eruption Cade's life-force had blared loudly; it was like his self had been subsumed into the planet's raw energy and become part of it.

After Jariah translated, Khat Lah said, "In that case, it may be difficult to retrieve him..."

"What do you mean, retrieve him?" Jariah said. "We're going back there to get Cade out."

"We do not understand what has happened to him, or how he has touched this planet."

"Listen, I know Cade better than any of you. He wouldn't want to merge with the Force or whatever. He'd want to *live*. He'd want to be a *man*, not some karking... glowing Force thing."

Lowbacca added that if they were going to understand what was going on here- especially how he and Jariah had gained the Force- they would have to separate Cade's individual consciousness within the eruption. Jariah took that as agreement and translated it eagerly.

"For all our sakes, I hope we can reach him," Khat Lah said. "It may take a very powerful Jedi to do it."

His eyes were square on Lowbacca. The Wookiee felt a touch of fear and the press of fate, but he said he'd do whatever was required of him. He'd be a poor Wookiee and Jedi both if he went back on his promises.

Khat Lah nodded, like that was enough. Neshri Buhl asked, "What of the young ones who journeyed with you?"

"I believe Eli Horn and Kyra are out here somewhere. I hope they are making their way back to the gate." He scanned the plan, vision panning from the unseen hypergate to the nearby pillar of light. "For now, I think we must concern ourselves with Cade Skywalker. On him everything depends."

"We should not hurry," said Neshri Buhl. "You need to rest."

"I will rest, but for a short while." His eyes narrowed on the light. "Then we will move again. And perhaps we will understand just a little of what we've awakened."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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Flying a modestly-armed, mildly-armored freighter into the middle of the chaos over Galactic City was neither a safe nor sane thing to do, but Ania couldn't just sit on the docking pad at Westport while everything went to hell. Thankfully her partners aboard *Free Agent* were of like mind.

They were clear of direct fighting at the moment, as AG-37 had them flying a slow a high-altitude loop over the government district, but they could see explosions and fires below. Her mother was down there somewhere, and so was Marasiah, freed from her prison. They'd received a short transmission burst minutes ago; through the static and background noise they hadn't made out much of Ganner's words but it sounded like they were trying to retrieve the empress, and they were in trouble.

"It's hard to pick up anything down there," Azlyn said as she hunched over the scanner. "I'm picking up several fires going rooftop-level. Some of them might be crash sites."

Ania didn't like that possibility. She jammed a switch on the comm console and said, "*Starlight Champion*, are you there? This is *Free Agent*. Ganner? Tes?" She paused. "*Mom*? Are you there? This is Ania."

No response, just like the other times she'd hailed.

"I also see some airspeeders going down to the rooftops," Azlyn added. "They might be rescue teams."

"Or they're looking for an escaped empress," Ania muttered.

"That too." Azlyn looked at AG-37. "The only way to find out is to get closer."

"I understand." The droid's top photoreceptor pulsed. "I will attempt to steer clear of combat situations."

That would be nice, but Ania didn't count on it. *Free Agent* began a steep drop and the city rushed up to meet them. She tried to mark their destination with her eyes but she'd never seen the transportation department building up close and didn't know the government district's layout.

Azlyn did. She leaned over Ania's shoulder and stabbed a finger at one building. "There's the target. Take us there, A-gee."

"Complying," said the droid.

He dropped *Free Agent* low over the cityscape and then gunned it toward the high tower. Starfighters were chasing rings around its peak and as they got close a few ships- TIE Predators- peeled down and vectored toward them.

"Not good," Ania said and turned to weapon controls. "Can we get a fly-by?"

"Attempting now," AG-37 said.

He dropped speed and pulled a hard turn around the base of the tower. Ania and Azlyn both craned, looking out the viewport for a sign of what had happened. They found it: one landing pad jutting from the building-face looked halfway torn off. One side of the metal platform, lightly scorched, tilted down in a slope steep enough for a person to slide off of. From there it was a kilometer-deep fall into the bottoms of Galactic City, and Ania prayed neither her mother nor Marasiah had taken the plunge.

They only got a second's glance at it before AG-37 swung them away, kicked power to engines, and fled. *Free Agent* rocked as its rear shield absorbed chains of laserfire.

Electric voice utterly calm, AG-37 said, "Ania, please clear those TIEs off our back."

"Right," she said, and tried to focus on the fight. The broken landing platform proved nothing. She had no idea where *Starlight Champion* was, whether Marasiah had been freed, whether her mother was even alive. For once in her life, she wished she had Force powers to help her locate them, but no such luck.



Instead she'd have to settle for what she'd always had: a good trigger finger. As Ania let bolts fly she hoped it would be enough.

Inside the justice center they'd done everything they could to carry on with the trial. When the Mon Cal cruiser had dropped into orbit the judges had put the court on hiatus and withdrawn to discuss parley with Senator Derroll. That had lasted until the first explosions over Galactic City. After that, it was just managing chaos.

Sigel Dare's troop of guards had fallen on the three accused first and whisked them to safety deep inside the building. The other Knights and security officers did their best to contain the audience in the courtroom. For now it seemed the safest place for them, but they were all frightened, unruly, and on the brink of total panic. There was no way to keep them calm; the best they could do was keep them restrained.

That was a job anyone could do. Treis Sinde, dragging three disguised mercenaries with him, escaped the courtroom and hurried to the same security station they'd done their initial sabotage in. From the exterior sensors still working it was clear a fight was raging all over Galactic City. Dozens of Crossfires were battling dozens of TIEs and some Alliance fighters were even making attack runs on the justice center. There were even reports of an aborted run by an Alliance troop shuttle, which might have been coming to free the accused by force of arms.

"None of this makes sense," Treis snarled. "How did those snubs get past our shields? Why did nobody see them launch from the Mon Cal cruiser?"

A flustered lieutenant said, "I don't know, sir. Maybe they were on the ground before the cruiser showed up, coordinating with it."

"What's that cruiser doing now?"

"They say it knocked out one of our star destroyers but we've got two more hitting it hard."

Unbelievable. An open fight between Alliance and Imperial ships over Coruscant itself. It was another civil war, and it had taken everyone by surprise. He didn't need the Force to tell his three companions were as shocked as anyone. The

blond man, Hondo, looked especially worried; his eyes said he needed a word with Treis in private.

Treis hurried out of the security station to a secure part of the hall. They were deep enough inside the building to be insulated from the sounds of battle, but the fight was still raging. He looked at all three mercenaries and asked, "Can any of you give me a better explanation than what we got back there?"

"No, definitely not," Yangar said.

"The sabotage you just did- the sabotage I *helped* you with- was that part of an invasion plan?"

"*Shab*, all we did was turn off some lights," said Oren. "All I know is I've got a sister out in that *osik*."

"And I've got a wife," Hondo grunted and pulled out a comlink. He tapped it on and said nervously, "Come on, *cyar'ika*, answer me please..."

From the swears Treis guessed these were Mandalorians. How Ganner Krieg had fallen in with their lot he couldn't imagine. He also couldn't see noble, upright Ganner willingly helping bring about this disaster, but he could have been duped. They could all have been duped.

Static sparked over the comlink and Hondo said, "Tes, are you there? Talk to me."

A small voice resolved from the noise. "Barely... ship crashed... need.... bad..."

"Do you have the empress?" Treis interjected. "Is she all right?"

More static, but he made out "...lost her... went down... old woman too..."

This was getting worse all the time. "Is Marasiah alive? Tell me!"

"Don't... all went to..."

They couldn't make anything else from the static. Hondo shouted, "Hold on, *cyar'ika*, we're coming for you! Just hold on." He shut the thing off and squeezed it in a fist. To Treis he said, "We need to get to a speeder, the best one you have. Right now."

"Are you mad? It's a war out there!"

"Yeah, and my wife out's out in it. Your boy Ganner too, and maybe the empress. Only one way to find out, right?"

Hondo stared at Treis hard. So far he'd helped these men work sabotage and collected information behind the regent's back. If he abandoned his post now he'd be doing so much more. He'd throw his lot in fully with men he didn't trust or understand, and he'd be walking away from a lifetime of service to the regnant of the Empire and the Fel Dynasty.

Yet Marasiah was out there somewhere, and his duty to her superseded all else.

The choice was surprisingly easy.

"I know where we can get a speeder," Treis said. "Let's get moving."

There were no good places to hide. The skyscraper was an island and Marin and Marasiah were stranded on its cliff-face, for the moment ignored as battle raged in the sky around them, but someone would be coming for them.

As the broken landing pad bucked beneath them, Marin had pointed out the portal to another docking bay ten storeys beneath them. This bay was closed off, with doors closed and pad removed, but the indentation in the skyscraper's slick side remained. The spot provided solid footing and some cover; it was the natural place to go.

The Force was their tool here. They used it to slow their long plunge, angle their bodies, and soften the landing, though Marasiah could tell from the older woman's wince that the impact still hurt. From there, Marasiah used Ganner's lightsaber to carve an opening in the sealed hangar door, one tall and narrow enough for the women to slip through one at a time. Beyond the opening was a dark and dusty hangar fallen into disuse.

"We can't stay here forever," Marasiah said. "Chalk will be looking for us. He'll probably search the entire building from the bottom-up."

"It's a big building," Marin said. "That'll take time."

"Yes, but this is an obvious place to look."

"We can't go deeper inside. We'll just be easier to pin down. Our best hope is to sit tight and wait for backup."

Marasiah looked through the carved-open gap. Starfighters still chased each other through the slanting afternoon light, but the frenzy seemed thinner than it had a moment ago.

“Once the battle dies down, they’ll increase their search for us.”

“I know.” Marin brought out her comlink and thumbed it on. She made hails on several channels, only to receive static. The old woman sighed. “Well, when it *does* die down, maybe we can get a call through.”

“What kind of ship is the backup?”

“It’s Ania’s ship. *Free Agent*. They were supposed to set down at Eastport and come in if they got a call. I don’t know if Ganner was able to get through to them before he went down.”

Marasiah warned, “It’s possible they were shot down too.”

“No.” Marin’s voice was firm. “If that happened I’d know it. They’re out there, somewhere.”

She turned and looked out the gap, as though expecting Ania Solo’s clunky freighter to show at any moment. Marasiah watched her stern profile. This woman looked around a decade older than Marasiah’s father, but like Roan Fel she’d maintained a strong body and sharp mind, and she clearly knew how to wield authority. But she also seemed more independent, more rugged, beholden to personal passions rather than official duty.

“So,” Marasiah said softly, “You are Ania’s mother.”

“That’s right.” Marin kept looking at the sky.

“And my father’s cousin. I always wondered what happened to you.”

Hesitantly, the old woman asked, “Did he ever talk about me?”

“Not in detail. He just said he had a cousin who’d abandoned her responsibilities. I didn’t even know your name. When Ania appeared she told me she was an orphan, but... my uncle did some checking and found out the truth.”

“Ania was telling you the truth, as she knew it. As to your father... I was never close to Roan.” Her expression went distant with other thoughts. She didn’t speak them.

“And your father was Arlen Fel.”

Marin nodded. Marasiah had only vague memories of her father’s uncle as a wily old man with a white beard and a shabby brown robe. According to her father, Arlen had been born on Bastion but left there after the creation of Imperial

Knights, preferring to stay with the Jedi instead. Whatever this Marin was now, she clearly hadn't been a Jedi for many years.

"Where were you?" Marasiah asked.

Marin looked at her distractedly. "What do you mean?"

"During the war against Krayt... All that suffering and all that death... What were you *doing* all that time?" Marasiah's breath was ragged; the words came out harsher than she'd meant them too.

Marin gave her a blank stare. "I had my own war to fight."

"But you're a—" Marasiah stopped herself.

Marin completed, "A Skywalker?" Marasiah nodded. The other woman shrugged. "I've never thought of myself as a Skywalker. Even when I was a Jedi... I always thought I was something different."

"I see. I understand where Ania got her... independent streak."

"Ania's independent because she had to fend for herself since age ten," Marin said, then softened her tone. "But maybe we have some things in common. Maybe it runs in the blood."

"From your father down to you."

"And he got it from *his* mother. Or so he said." Marin's eyes went distant on another memory. "But that was all a long time ago. I thought it was another life until recently."

"Is that why you're here now?"

"Maybe." Marin scanned the violent sky again.

Marasiah knew she was trying to end the conversation, but she added, "Thank you for coming for me."

Marin glanced back. "You're welcome." Then she looked at the sky again.

Marasiah felt restless. She looked at her bare feet, dirty and bruised from so much running. As for her hands, they'd been bruised for days. After her uncle's revelation- his confession- she'd pounded the wall of her cell until her knuckles almost cracked, and her lower back still ached from the twist and strain of so many punches. Over the past few days her anger had been reduced to a simmer but it was still there. When she'd used the Force to battle those droids it had been easy to dip into her hate and draw power from it.

All her life she'd been told the dark side was potent and seductive, and the best way to ward it off was through rigid self-control. She'd been taught self-mastery was the key to being a good ruler as well, but she was beginning to think it was an overrated commodity.

Standing at the gap, Marin took out her comm and tried several more calls. Still nothing. She sighed and pocketed the link. "What will you do when we get out of this?"

"If," Marasiah said.

"*When*. I'm trying to stay optimistic. Don't ruin it for me. So what will you do?"

Marasiah looked into the darkness of the deserted hangar. "You said something about taking me to a ship. Admiral Bey's renegades."

"That was the original plan, before this." She waved a hand at the sky.

"My uncle must be punished for what he's done. I'll see to that."

"He was family and he betrayed you. I can understand you're angry."

"You have no idea," she glowered.

"Maybe not. But I do know something about holding grudges and what it does to you."

"Are you going to lecture me about the dark side?" Marasiah sniffed. She didn't want one, not from a rogue ex-Jedi who'd abandoned the galaxy to its fight against Krayt.

"Not the dark side exactly. I had to deal with that once, a long time ago, when I was about your age. That was... an ugly thing, and for all its power I knew I had to keep away from it."

Marin paused and gave her a meaningful look. If she'd picked up Marasiah's angry urges when fighting the droids, they must have been stronger than she'd thought.

Then the old woman looked away and went on, "I was more thinking about something else. The thing about a grudge is that if you hold on to it for long enough it grows inside you. It gets to be this weight you carry around, and most of the time it feels cold and dead, until you dwell on it. Then it gets hot with hate."

Marasiah already had her first hints of that. She felt her

anger toward Hogrum was cooling, until she thought about him directly. Then dark fire started burning inside her.

“What do you suggest?” she said. “That I forget everything he’s done? That I walk away?”

“No. I’m just saying don’t let that grudge grow until it takes you over. If you have to walk away to avoid it, then it’s what you have to do.”

Marasiah didn’t know what experience this woman was speaking from. She only knew that it couldn’t compare with the pain of Hogrum’s betrayal. “This isn’t about a grudge. This is about justice. My uncle will pay.”

Marin looked at her again and lightly probed her feelings with the Force. Marasiah shielded herself awkwardly. It had been a long time since she’d been around someone with these powers and she found it wasn’t the welcome experience she’d hoped for.

Finally, Marin shrugged. “Well, what do I know? I’m no empress.”

“You certainly aren’t.”

Marin snorted softly. “I didn’t know your father that well... but you do remind me of him.”

For most her life, comparisons with Roan Fel had given Marasiah a flush of pride. Then it had become shame. Now, she wasn’t sure how she felt. Just when she’d been starting to find emotional equilibrium this woman had thrown her off-balance again, in ways more subtle but just as seismic as her uncle’s revelations.

It was too much to deal with, especially now. Marasiah muttered, “You should keep calling for Ania.”

“When you’re right, you’re right,” Marin admitted. She got out her comm and tried again.

There was a saying about ‘any landing you can walk away from’ but Ganner couldn’t remember it right now. He was less walking and more hobbling, putting as little pressure on his right ankle as possible. He was in better shape than Sauk, who’d gotten banged around during the crash-landing and bore nasty bruises on his bulbous head. Shado and Tes supported him between them as they staggered across the low-lying rooftop, away from the flaming wreckage of

*Starlight Champion*. Between the fire, the smoke, and the straight black line they'd carved through a block of cityscape on their way down, it wouldn't be long before someone came for them, and it probably wouldn't be anyone they wanted to see.

"Tes," Ganner called, "Any word from Hondo?"

"I think he's on his way."

"You think?"

She shot him a glare. "Sorry, but in case you hadn't noticed, comms are a *shabla* mess right now."

Lots of things were a mess. Tes' business-skirt was torn up and she was bleeding from the right thigh. It was a slow flow, not arterial, but her whole leg was getting painted red and soon blood loss would get to her.

Shado seemed the least knocked-up of any of them, which Ganner supposed was fair enough, since it was only his piloting skills that had kept the crash for being fatal. Though he didn't have any external injuries the Jedi was in a daze. As he hauled Sauk along his head was bent back and he stared at the violence in the sky with shock or maybe awe.

Coming up alongside him, Ganner clasped Shado's shoulder. "Are you still with us?"

The Twi'lek blinked and pulled his eyes downward. "I'm here."

"Thank you, Shado. None of us would be alive if it weren't for you."

"He's right," Tes said, "You really did save our *shebse*. Thanks, *jetii*."

Shado looked back at the sky. "You remember when I said I had a bad feeling about this?"

"I guess you were right," Ganner admitted. "But there's still hope. Ania's still out there, and if she can get Marasiah and Marin and bust out of Coruscant we can still win this."

Shado didn't seem to be listening. Hoarsely he said, "I never thought it would be this bad."

"That's your mistake," Tes grunted as Sauk's weight bore on her. "Looking on the bright side. Always bites you in the *shebs* eventually."

"We don't really need Mando wisdom right now," Ganner said.



"But she's right," Shado said. "For a moment, though, I thought..."

Shado trailed off and looked at the sky again. Ganner was starting to think he might have damaged a *lekku* and was about to examine them when Tes threw her free arm in the air and started hollering.

Ganner looked up too and saw an open-topped airspeeder swooping down on them. It had markings of Coruscant security and he instinctively reached for his lightsaber, but it wasn't there. He hoped Marasiah was making good use of it.

The speeder swooped down toward the rooftop, and the sight of its occupants filled Ganner with relief. Oren Vevec was at the controls, dressed in a grey technician's outfit. As soon as the speeder set down, Hondo Karr and Yangar Skirata vaulted out and raced to help the wounded. What really grabbed Ganner's attention, though, was the red-armored, gray-bearded man in the front passenger's seat.

As Hondo hurried his wife to the speeder and Yangar carried Sauk, Ganner told Treis Sinde, "You didn't have to come for us."

"An old man like me wasn't much use in the courthouse," he and tried to smile, though Ganner knew the elder Knight had crossed a line and couldn't go back. "What happened to the empress, Ganner?"

"She's still up in that tower." He hoped.

"Is she alone?"

"No. There's... one more with her. We've also got Azlyn and a backup team on the way, hopefully."

Oren looked toward the transportation center building. It was over two kilometers away and some starfighters still swarmed around it. The Crossfires that had once filled the sky had been gradually thinned down, and TIEs had established dominance. It wouldn't be long until the battle was completely over, and Ganner didn't know if that would make it easier or harder to reach the empress.

As he placed Sauk in the speeder's rear couch Yangar said, "This thing doesn't have any weapons besides what we're packing." He slapped his hip. "That may not be enough."

"We also don't have much room back here," Hondo said as he set Tes beside the Mon Cal, "Plus we need medical help."

Shado, standing at the speeder's nose, said, "We can fly. To the Jedi Temple. They'll take our wounded and might stand a better chance at contacting Ania."

The Mandos looked at Ganner and so did Treis, and he realized he was being called on to decide. They were right about this speeder; it had little arms and less armor, and right now it was filled to capacity. It would be best for them all to seek shelter with the Jedi; he just didn't know what was best for Marasiah.

But he had to decide, so Ganner said, "To the Jedi Temple."

"Let's get on it then." Oren revved the engine.

They piled in as tight as they could: Treis and Oren in the front seats; Shado, Ganner, and Yangar behind them, Tes, Hondo, and Sauk in the rear. Oren kept the speeder low as he maneuvered around the bases of tall government buildings, north to the Jedi Temple. The place looked undamaged from the fighting as though it had been aloof from it all, or perhaps irrelevant.

As they neared Ganner realized the comlink in his pocket was vibrating and he awkwardly dug it out. Thumbing it on he said, "Ganner here, who is this?"

"This is your pickup," Azlyn's voice said, surprisingly clear. "Where are you?"

"We're heading for the Jedi Temple now, in a security speeder! I have Master Sinde with me. I have everyone except—" he swallowed, "The empress. And Marin Skirata."

He thought he saw Sinde frown at the second name. Azlyn said, "Okay, we're on our way. Meet you at the Jedi Temple."

The transmission cut out. Ganner announced, "That was Azlyn and Ania. They're on their way and—"

"We heard," Tes said from the back. "Tell me that ship's got a sick bay."

"Fully stocked," Sauk moaned, "A-gee's... a good medic, actually."

Rushing into a potential combat situation when you had wounded wasn't a smart move, but Ganner was willing to risk it if they could rescue Marasiah. He dared optimism; they might pull this off after all.

Oren brought the speeder to an open hangar bay on the west side of the Jedi pyramid. A handful of being in brown robes were waiting with expressions that got even more confused when *Free Agent* came roaring in minutes later. The big freighter reduced engine power but didn't do a full shut-down even as its landing ramp lowered and Ania and Azlyn came racing down.

Ania was on Ganner as soon as he got out of the speeder. "What happened to them? Are they still at the tower?"

"I think so. I'm not sure where."

"Damn. We did a fly-by but got chased away by some karking TIEs. We'll have to risk going back."

"That may not be easy," Sinde said, "The battle is winding down. The regent's fighters will shoot at anything they even think might be hostile."

"Then we better move fast before they wind down any more." Ania planted hands on hips and finally looked at the scene. Hondo was helping Tes out of the speeder while Yangar and Oren carried Sauk.

"A knock on the head, maybe a concussion," Ganner explained. "You have a medical scanner on your ship?"

"Right. Damn, this is a mess."

Shado came up beside her. "The Jedi Temple has medical facilities. They'll be glad to help, but if you leave him with us, I don't know if you'll ever see him again."

He was right. When they grabbed Marasiah they'd probably have a swarm of enemies on their tail. If they tried taking her to the Jedi they might bring Chalk's wrath down on the Temple. No, they had to take her someplace safe and defended while they regrouped and decided their next step. Despite all the chaos going on, that place was still probably Admiral Bey's fleet.

"We can take care of Sauk," Ania said. "A-gee has the thrusters still burning. We need to get back in the air fast."

"Agreed," Ganner said. "Master Sinde, thank you for your help so far. If you want to--"

"I'm not staying here," the old Knight shook his head. "I'm getting the empress."

Of course he'd say that; Ganner had only wanted to give him the option. "Thank you, sir. Let's get on Ania's ship."

“Technically it’s A-Gee’s,” Ania corrected as they started for the landing ramp.

“Ganner wait,” a voice said behind them.

He turned to see Shado planted beside the now-emptied speeder. He waved for Ania and Sinde to get into the freighter and walked back to the Jedi. Though he already knew the answer he asked, “You’re getting off here?”

“I’ve gone too far already.” His eyes and voice were hollow.

“You’ve gone exactly far enough. If it weren’t for you, we’d have all died back there. The Force was with you today.”

Shado winced. “No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t with any of us.”

“We can still get Marasiah back.”

The Twi’lek sighed; he looked like a man who had a million things to say and no time for any of them. Softly, looking away, he said, “Goodbye, Ganner.”

The other man extended a hand. Shado took it, shook weakly, and released.

That was all the farewell they had time for. Ganner hurried to *Free Agent*. As he clambered up the ramp he spared an over-the-shoulder glance at Shado. The Jedi had already turned and walked away.

Another volley of concussion missiles impacted on grey hull. Superheated fires twisted armor plating and furled red curtains quickly swallowed by space. Black debris spilled outward, catching unlucky starfighters that disappeared in short white bursts. The star destroyer smoldered and died as *Mon Elusia* surged past.

The Mon Cal cruiser looked barely better. From the bridge viewport Saarai could look down the length of its hull and see black impact craters, torn durasteel armor, and burn-out patches of superstructure exposed to the vacuum. The forward fields were totally down, and the aft screens were just barely holding back the vicious volleys from the two other destroyers. As she watched, packs of TIE Neutralizers swooped down and peppered *Mon Elusia*’s undefended hull with torpedoes.

“Helm, do we have a course?” Captain Errangar barked.

"Plotted, sir, but we're not out of the gravity well yet and there's a frigate cutting in ahead of us."

Saarai looked out the viewport. The destroyer had slipped past them now and space looked almost clear, but a new and smaller wedge was slipping in from their right flank. Normally an *Ardent*-class frigate would be no match for the Mon Cal cruiser, but all this one had to do was slow them down enough for the star destroyers behind them to break through.

"Tell all fighter wings to converge on the frigate. Knock out its bridge! Go!"

Though TIEs kept nipping at *Mon Elusia*'s hull, the cruiser's remaining fighter complement- now at half initial strength- rushed toward the frigate. As the deck shook under repeated barrages Saarai felt a well of frustrated anger. As a Sith she'd been taught to stay in control of every situation, but she was absolutely helpless on this bridge. Porat stayed by the tactical display, still trying very hard to look stoic and determined for the crew, but she knew he was just as terrified.

Far ahead, explosions sparked across the frigate's shields. When *Mon Elusia* edged close enough, it opened fire on the frigate with whatever forward guns still worked. The frigate held fast dead ahead of them, its broadside turned to bring as many batteries on their nose as possible. The bridge rocked yet again as explosions tore apart the cruiser's blunted nose, sending more debris and unlucky crew into space. On Errangar's urging, helm did not drop speed.

And then there was a brighter explosion: the frigate's bridge section vanished in a ball of flame. Whether it came from *Mon Elusia*'s turbolasers or a bomber run, the sight sent cheers across the bridge. On a surge of elation Saarai herself joined in.

"Once we clear that wreckage I want a jump to lightspeed," Errangar called. "All systems, stand by to get the hell out of here!"

That brought a few more whoops from the crew pit. Yet as they surged past the wrecked frigate, a trio of TIE Neutralizers swung into view. They appeared above *Mon Elusia*'s spine and raced low above the unshielded hull, cutting a direct line toward the bridge cluster. A pack of

Crossfires dropped down after them. They knocked out one TIE, then another. The last bomber popped off a pair of torpedoes and pulled up. The warheads lanced forward, growing brighter and brighter, closer and closer, and Saaraï froze in dread as she watched them.

It seemed to take forever for them to hit. Then: white heat, smoke, noise, chaos.

Saaraï found herself lying on the deck. Alarm klaxons blared and people shouted but the air was filled with acrid haze. She tried to sit upright but was too weak. She looked at her left shoulder and saw everything beneath it in tatters. She was lying in a pool of her own blood.

“Helm, can we get lightspeed?” Errangar shouted. His voice was faded, like it came from a great distance.

Saaraï didn’t hear the response. The smoke-filled bridge grew dark around her, dark and quiet, though she knew there was so much going on. She knew she was wounded, in shock, maybe dying, and she struggled to stay awake. Suddenly Porat was above her, a horn-topped silhouette bending close.

“Stay awake, Saaraï! Just stay awake!” He was shouting too but she could barely hear him.

She tried to speak but no words came when she opened her mouth. She felt Porat touching her, doing something to her. She felt slight pressure; maybe he was trying to tourniquet her arm. She felt his hand cup her face as he leaned close and said, “We just jumped to hyperspace. We’re home free. Now we’ll get you to sick bay and you’ll be alright.”

Saaraï hadn’t felt the surge to lightspeed. She was drifting fast into darkness again. Porat reared back and shouted, “Medic! I need a medic now!”

She didn’t hear or see anything else. The struggle was too great, and dark silence claimed her.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

As they crossed the ruins of a city and circled vast craters wrought by ancient war, Kyra knew they'd come to a crossroads. They were at a point where they could find their way back to the hypergate. It was probably only a day's trek more. Yet there was no certainty they could open it, even with their renewed powers. She'd gained some command of hers but was far from a master, while Eli seemed more uncertain than ever.

Elsewhere, just past the horizon-line, a new light beckoned. The luminous pillar stabbed steadily toward the stars. Kyra wanted to go there, to see what a new eruption and search for any hint of what had happened to their companions.

"Besides," she told Eli, "If we're going to open that gate we'll need all the power we can get."

He looked at that tall light like it repulsed him. "Are you sure you want that power?"

"If it gets us through the gate. Don't you?"

"But after we get back, after we get away from this place... Do you still want it?"

She watched him closely and felt him in the Force. Even if he had stolen the Sith holocron, he wasn't going dark. If anything he was recoiling from it, afraid of backsliding.

"This power we have... it's a gift, one barely anybody in the galaxy has anymore. We can do things with it nobody else can, *good* things." She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched but didn't draw away. "Obviously it

can do bad things too, and you'd know all about those. But how can we *not* use what we have?"

"I'm not sure we're the ones using it."

"We can be, if we do it right. If we're strong enough."

Power within became power without. She was sure of that now. A while back Jao had told her that the Force was the collective bonds connecting all life, and if you did it right, you projected your own self onto everything around you, subtly altering people and events. This planet was that principle on a grand and dangerous scale. If she could command the power here, she could surely handle it on the worlds beyond.

More softly she said, "We should at least go investigate. All it will cost us is a little time."

"If we get closer those ghosts will probably come back. Are you ready for that?"

"We've beaten them before. I can do it all by myself if I have to."

"I know, but you didn't *release* them. You didn't free your heart from them."

She thought of those two Jeodu: old, dead, silent. They were icons of something greater: the pain she'd been through to get to today.

"Maybe I don't want to release them," she said. "That vision the Force woke me up with was a nightmare, and it was awful, but it was *mine*. And nightmares like that are still happening all over the galaxy. Someone has to try and set things right. Who better than us?"

"You can't create galactic peace all by yourself."

"No," she admitted, "But if I didn't try I'd be a coward."

She said it softly, not meaning to accuse, but Eli recoiled. He shook his shoulder from her grip and looked back to the light.

"I'm glad one of us has clarity," he said, without trying to hide his sarcasm.

"Hey," she said, "We got this far together. We just need to go a little further. Then we can leave."

As she watched him watch the light, Kyra realized she did trust Eli after all, maybe more than he trusted himself. He understood his power and responsibility; all he needed was



the inner strength to act on it. Maybe she could help him find it.

"I'm going to go there," she said, "to see what I can find. Will you come with me?"

Eli inhaled and looked into her eyes. "I guess we'll see this through as far as we can."

"We will," she agreed, and together they started the long walk toward the light.

They could see from a distance that this eruption was sprouting from the top of a broad hill. Newly-grown life spread out beyond the hill's base: low trees, flowering plants, and swathes of tall grass that rippled in the wind.

Jariah wanted to hurry to the light and help Cade, but his pace slowed with the rest of them as they began walking through the tall grass. It brushed their hips and tickled their palms; Jariah kept his close to his blaster. Though he couldn't see anything deadly he was getting a strong inexplicable feeling, the kind Jedi apparently got all the time. It was telling him things were about to get very dangerous.

Or maybe he was just scared. The geyser of energy was unlike anything he'd ever seen or felt. It seemed unnatural, impossible, and his reason cried out that it shouldn't exist at all. His companions- one Jedi Master and a bunch of Yuuzhan Vong- seemed to approach the thing with a mix of caution and reverence.

He stared into the light, trying to find the shape of Cade in there, but couldn't. Maybe if they got closer.

They were just starting up the base of the hill when old ghosts showed up. They came out of nowhere, appearing to Jariah in a black mili-second blink. There were over a dozen of them this time, standing near the top of the hill and facing the newcomers. They were silhouettes against the light, but Jariah could tell from their tall bodies, bald heads, and jagged shoulder-plates that these were more of Lowbacca's phantom Yuuzhan Vong.

There were a lot more of them than last time, and they were blocking the path to the eruption. Still, Jariah's first feeling was relief; at least it wasn't *his* ghosts they'd have to deal with. Not that he ever knew what his ghosts would be.

He could have plenty, in theory, but he wasn't a man who clung to the past or nurtured regrets. He'd always tried to look to the future, even if he didn't know what the future was.

Jariah was the only one relieved. The others stopped in the grass and grabbed their weapons. Lowbacca ignited his lightsaber and gave a frustrated growl; he was angry at himself for not controlling his emotions and putting them all in danger.

The two groups stood a hundred meters apart; neither charged or moved. Jariah muttered, "Who budges first?"

"You may yet dispel them, Master *Jeedai*," Xahn Carr told Lowbacca.

The Wookiee gave another growl; if he knew how to get rid of them he'd have done it already.

Jariah looked anxiously over his shoulder and yelped in surprise. More figures stood on the dry plain behind them. They were maybe another hundred meters away: tall and gangly, with large heads, but not Yuuzhan Vong. Duros, maybe? He counted five of them and they, too, were standing still. Even further back he thought he saw two more silhouettes, broad-bodied and thick-necked, from some race he couldn't place.

"Guys," he hissed, "Who the hell are those?"

Khat Lah sucked in breath. "I believe my old companions are near."

"What they- you mean Kyra and Eli?"

"Correct."

Jariah would have welcomed the help if they hadn't brought their own ghosts with them. "What do we do now?" he growled. "We all just gonna stare at each other until somebody finds enlightenment?"

Lowbacca roared mournfully and raised a shaggy arm. Jariah followed it and saw the Yuuzhan Vong specters marching slowly down the hillside. There seemed even more than the last time he'd looked their way. Snarling, he checked his pistol to make sure it was fully loaded. He didn't have many spare bullets and the way this was looking he'd need them all. Frantic, he looked back at the Duros, which still stood in place.

"Anybody got a good plan?" he asked.

"Defend yourselves," Khat Lah said, and snapped an amphistaff at the phantoms ahead. With a soundless cry, the jagged warriors broke into a sprint and threw themselves into the fight.

They saw battle joined from a distance and knew it wasn't all a dream. Eli could feel the panic and consternation of living beings in the Force; he was pretty sure Khat Lah was among them, and even far away he could mark out a big Wookiee body brawling at the base of the hill.

"Come on," Kyra called and broke into a sprint.

Eli joined her in racing across the plain. As they got closer he saw Yuuzhan Vong battling Yuuzhan Vong; Lowbacca slashing with his lightsaber and turning warriors to black smoke; Jariah Syn was dropped to one knee and popping off careful shots from a cracking pistol. Eli could immediately tell the difference between the real fighters and the phantoms, with the Force and with his eyes. The attacking Yuuzhan Vong were smears of black under the red sun, like the wraiths Kyra had summoned.

As they grew closer Eli saw something else: five Duros standing on the plain, watching the fight like spectators. Past them, the two Jeodu. He stumbled and skidded to a halt but Kyra kept running, all the way past them to the fight on the hillside. He could feel her in the Force as a blaze of determination. As she approached the hill she was joined by her wraiths again: Cade, Jao, and Ania all as slippery shadows. They joined the fight, battling equally-slippery Yuuzhan Vong that kept on materializing and charging down from the hilltop like an infinite supply of bad memories.

The whole fight was a dream given form, but Eli knew it could be as deadly as life. He clasped his lightsaber but didn't turn it on; he watched the brawl but couldn't move.

And then he saw the five Duros approach him, slowly and purposefully. Some had hands clenched to fists; other short blades. He could feel them in the Force; their anger and murderous intent made him shudder. He still didn't understand what these ghosts were. They weren't mere wraiths like the black golems Ania had summoned; these

were something more, perhaps the real Force-essence of his father's killers summoned and made manifest.

They stepped close and closer, almost to striking range, and still Eli didn't turn on the lightsaber.

He'd fought then before, over and over again. It only ever delayed their return. To defeat them and truly banish them he had to do something else. He had to let go.

And he *wanted* to let go. It was not that he forgave them for what they'd done- some things didn't deserve to be forgiven- but he was *sick* of being driven by fear and old hate. He was sick of their crime being the fulcrum point on which he wavered between Jedi and Sith. He was sick of being defined by other people.

He was sick of the Force. He was sick of the war between Jedi and Sith, light and dark, in which these men, his dead father, Eli himself and trillions of others had all been expendable pawns. Even Darth Krayt, that fearsome fountain of dark energy, was a pawn too. Darth Talon had told him once: a long, long time ago, Krayt had just been a boy mourning his murdered father.

The Duros were on him. One swung a punch that connected to his face. Still clutching the inert saber, Eli fell to the ground. He landed on his back and held his hands up over his face; another Duros came in and kicked him in the side.

The pain was as real as his father's had been in his last moments. Reikar Horn had died shocked and panicked and confused, disbelieving his Force could let him die like this. Eli felt none of that. He knew the Force was the cruelest master, and if the only liberation he'd get was death then he'd take it however it came. The Duros kicked him again; they crowded above him, huge eyes staring down, emanating lethal wrath.

Still on his back, Eli released the saber and let it fall in the dirt. He held his hands out like he was welcoming an embrace. He felt no shock or panic or confusion, no anger or hate. They were pawns and so was he and liberation would come to them together or not at all.

The killing blow did not fall. The Duros crowded over him, staring down; he felt their murderous intent ebb in the Force.

There was a small wash of relief from them, and then their bodies dissolved into white starflies that spiraled upward, faded, and disappeared.

Eli stared at the star-packed sky for what seemed like forever, until he realized he was going to live.

Still breathing hard, he forced himself to sit upright. He looked at Skywalker's lightsaber sitting beside him in the dust, then picked it up. He stood on wobbling legs; his face and chest ached from the beating and he knew he'd feel their hurt for days. He looked out across the plain and saw Kyra's two ghosts standing far away, watching.

Finally, Eli turned toward the hill. He saw the pillar of light and the battle spread at its base that seemed just as frenzied as before. Slowly, steadily, he began walking toward it.

Like a dream the battle wore on, escaping time and stretching toward infinity. There seemed no beginning and no end to the dance of shadows and wraiths; lashing amphistaffs, flickering lightsabers, a single pistol cracking over and over.

And yet, Lowbacca began to understand. It was Kyra's arrival that did it. The Force was with the young woman; she blazed determination and knowledge like few Jedi he'd ever seen. She brought with her a rush of her own ghosts, not malevolent but under control. He felt the Force flow around her, directed by her, and the shadows of Cade, Jao, and Ania flowed with her will, vanquishing Lowbacca's century-old nightmares one after another. There was nothing of the real beings in those shadows; they were merely form and shape given to the memories of those people inside Kyra, the people she loved and needed.

Lowbacca's ghosts never stopped coming. He was an old being and his supply ran deep. He understood now why they'd been so reluctant to take him through the gate. As he danced and battled against the endless spectral warriors- with the Force so rich here he could draw on it and never tire- Lowbacca watched attrition wear on his companions. Neshri Buhl staggered, bleeding from the arm after a slash from a spectral amphistaff. Another warrior crumbled after a blow to the head. Jariah Syn's pistol was running low on

ammunition and he was frantically backing away as warriors crowded toward him.

Kyra's three specters weren't enough to turn the tide or end the fight, yet they filled Lowbacca with hope. That untrained girl could, in some way, master her confusion and give manifest to the people who'd given her strength. Just as Lowbacca's supply of enemies ran deep, so did his well of friends.

Even as he battled, he retreated within himself. It was no easy task but Lowbacca was a Jedi Master, and even as he slashed and danced he found the memories of those he'd loved and lost. Immediately he thought of his daughter Rallranarra, killed fifty years ago in the fight against Abeloth. The pain was immediate and exquisite but he clung to it; to forget the pain of her death he'd have to forget the joy of her life.

From Rallranarra he plunged deeper. He thought of all the Jedi he's seen grown old and die. He remembered all the Skywalkers- Nat, Kol, Jade, Ben, Luke himself- and what he'd learned from each of them. He cherished sage wisdom from all the Masters on the Council and the innocent knowledge of children he'd trained. He thought on Arlen, his very first apprentice, and thought of Arlen spiraled back to Arlen's mother and from Jaina Solo it spread across his first Jedi friends, his best, the ones he still missed most.

Swirling, dancing, fighting, Lowbacca conjured them all in his mind. Tenel Ka charging into Yavin 4's dangerous jungle as fearless as a Wookiee. Zekk struggling toward redemption. Raynar amazed to have friends for the first time. Anakin Solo questing for his place with the Jedi and Tahiri questing for her place without Anakin. Jacen, before darkness claimed him, questing for the truth behind everything. And Jaina herself, sword and anchor, enduring and surviving.

Thought of his dead brought pain but without his dead there would be no Lowbacca. He embraced that pain, cherished it inside him, nurtured it until it swelled and grew and found manifest.

The Yuuzhan Vong had been right to fear what he could do on this side of the gate. He was an old Jedi Master and the power he could summon dwarfed what the rest of them could

manage. Yet just as Jedi learned power they learned control. Self-mastery was the first and final skill, and as only a Jedi Master could, Lowbacca roused his best ghosts and gave them form.

They came charging down from the hilltop eruption, as the spectral Yuuzhan Vong had before them. It was a rush of bodies, slippery like shadows, moving fast with blazing swords held high. The battle on the hillside staggered to a halt as every combatant, flesh and phantom, turned to stare at the approaching wave.

Then the wave was on them. Burning swords slashed through ghost-warriors, vanquishing them in a blur of smoke. Lowbacca watched every motion, knew it, commanded it without thinking. With his eyes and with the Force he saw Rallranarra charge through one Yuuzhan Vong wraith, breaking it apart with the lash of a strong Wookiee arm. He saw a shadow with one arm and long braids whirl a silver saber through another enemy, then stand back-to-back with a blue-bladed ghost.

And as he watched, knew, and commanded he also felt them in the Force. The ghosts he'd called on were more than the Yuuzhan Vong specters he'd summoned by accident, more than the golems Kyra used. In bringing back his dead he'd caused flecks of them to emerge from the Cosmic Force and assume fleeting definition. With certainty only possible in the Force, he knew it was his daughter barreling down warriors; it was Tenel Ka and Jacen standing back-to-back.

It would have been impossible any place but here. As he'd been told, the Force was powerful and raw and everywhere, and a strong enough will could accomplish the impossible.

The impossible brought him joy. Ghosts of those he'd loved battled those he'd hated but they had all sprung from him. Love and hate, joy and grief, light and dark balanced within him to create something more than either, a great and powerful whole where every piece was inseparable from every other.

Standing in the middle of his swarming dreams, Lowbacca lowered his lightsaber and shut off its molten blade. The Force surged within him, filling him with elation he'd never known in all his long life. Every ghost was him, and he

would not surrender any of them. Instead he spread his arms wide as if to embrace them all: the grieved-for dead, the hated enemies, the strife and success that aggregated to create his life.

The surge came on so strong and bright his vision was consumed with light. In that moment he felt the great wellspring at the hilltop and he felt the familiar sensation of Cade Skywalker, as connected to all those ghosts as he was. He felt so close and clear Lowbacca thought he could pull him out right there.

Then the light faded. Lowbacca felt emptied, exhausted, and slumped to one side. The hillside resolved around him and emptied before his eyes. The Yuuzhan Vong specters burst into motes of light that lifted on the wind and dissolved among the sky's tight-packed stars. His loved ones lasted a moment longer; his eyes met Rallranarra's and he felt a warm touch in the Force, one he'd wanted for fifty years, before his daughter, too, dissolved into starflies.

Another ghost stood closer. The small brown-haired woman cocked her head and watched him. It was Jaina; not the teenager he'd first met nor the white-haired old woman he'd said last goodbye to, not any of the shades of age he'd known in their long time together. She was all of them and none of them, part of the Force and beyond the toll of years, pure Jaina and nothing else.

Her ageless face gave a tight smile, and then a wink, and then she was gone.

Light lifted from the hillside like a blanket, then dissolved, leaving the scene empty. Lowbacca dropped to his knees, chest-deep in tall grass. One by one the others formed a circle around him: Khat Lah and his four Yuuzhan Vong, each bearing some wound from the battle; Jariah Syn, face blank with shock; Kyra looking at him with awe and admiration. None of them had any words for what they'd just experienced.

The only one not looking at Lowbacca was Eli Horn. The young man's eyes were lifted to the hilltop, and the geyser of bright power awaiting them.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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Emerald laserblasts lanced past her cockpit window, and Anj Dahl snapped her Crossfire into a starboard roll. Coruscant's sprawling cityscape seemed to revolve around her, starting on her right flank then swinging over her head while the twilight sky panned beneath her feet. The TIE Predator held close behind, and her whole ship rocked as the next blasts hit her shields.

"A little help here?" she snarled into her headset, and right on cue, another Crossfire dropped behind the TIE and burst it with a well-placed quad-laser burst.

"Thanks for the help, Rogue Five," she sighed and pulled her fighter back into level flight, with sky above and city below. "Are we clear?"

"For the moment."

"Good. All Rogues, follow me. We're going to make a run for the government district."

Her pilots clicked affirmatives and dropped into formation behind her. It had taken a long slog to get from orbit to the surface, slip beneath the local shield dome, and cross Galactic City. They'd already lost two pilots and she was afraid they might still lose more.

She'd been hoping that, once down here, she could hail the Crossfires that had attacked the justice center and ask who they were and what the kark they were thinking, but as the low rooftops and sporadic skyscrapers of the government district loomed ahead, her scanners told her the sky was

almost entirely filled with TIEs. Those Alliance ships, or whatever they were, had been scoured clean and the fighting had almost entirely stopped. That was exactly what they didn't need; it meant they'd have to handle a sky full of hostiles themselves.

They approached from a low altitude, practically skimming rooftops, but that would only delay detection so long. Hoping they weren't charging a fleshgnat's nest for nothing, Anj switched frequencies and tried hailing Ania Solo's ship.

The one good thing about the fight winding down was that it was a lot easier to make calls. Only mild static marred the other agent's familiar voice. "This is *Free Agent*. Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," Anj said. "Are you still in Galactic City?"

"Kicking off from the Jedi Temple and inbound to the Department of Transport building. We've got an empress to pick up."

So far, so good. "Do you have an evac plan?"

"Not yet. We have to get there first."

Anj checked her scanners. The transit department skyscraper wasn't far from the justice center, and both buildings had a healthy halo of TIEs flying circles around them. "Tell me you have some idea where she is."

"I think so. We had a botched attempt before. Trying again now. She should be by one of the lower docking ports." There was a small tremble in Ania's voice, and a lot of desperate hope. "If you've got air support, we could definitely use it."

Anj eyed the target skyscraper and the TIEs at its peak. "How about we cut in fast and draw them away, then you swoop in?"

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks."

"That's what we're here for," Anj said, switched her comm freq, and quickly relayed the plan to her Rogues.

It would be a desperate move, and it would probably get more Rogues killed, but as she'd said, it was what they were here for. Her sensors told her that *Mon Elusia* had escaped to hyperspace, probably after taking heaps of damage and losing lots of crew. They were on their own down here, and

if *Free Agent* did pick up the empress they'd still have to punch out through a hostile fleet.

Their best hope was to get Marasiah Fel and get out before the Imps knew what was going on. With that in mind, Anj kicked engines to full power and rushed ahead, her squadron right behind her.

When you had no good place to hide it was inevitable you'd be found. Marasiah knew that and had braced for discovery, but their time had run out too soon.

The enemy came from a heavy airspeeder that had circled the base of the skyscraper and found the hole they'd carved in the docking bay's closed door. Marasiah and Marin tried to work together to push the speeder away with the Force, but laserfire from the stormtroopers packed inside broke their concentration. The speeder swung close enough for one trooper to lob a flashbang through the hole and into the hangar. Marin immediately used the Force to throw it to the far side of the chamber but the light was still blinding, the noise deafening. Before their senses cleared, four stormtroopers had swung by fibercable from speeder through the hole, into their hiding place.

If they recognized the barefoot, disheveled woman in white pajamas as their empress, they didn't show it. These were probably her uncle's most loyal troops, sent explicitly to find her. When Marasiah ignited Ganner's lightsaber and charged toward them they opened fire without flinching. Stun blasts: Hogrum still wanted her alive.

Marasiah's charge was the distraction Marin needed; she gave all four troopers a Force-push, knocking them off-balance and allowing Marasiah to rush in. Without hesitation she cut through one trooper at the waist and took another in a slash across the chest. A close-range laser-blast sizzled past her ear and she reversed grip, jabbed back and took a third stormtrooper through the chest. The fourth darted back to the hole and flung out a hand signal to the speeder waiting beyond. Seconds later, more troops were swinging into the hangar.

The seconds were vital. Marasiah danced back on bare feet and until she was shoulder-to-shoulder with Marin, who's

used the Force to grab a fallen trooper's blaster rifle. The old woman knew how to use it; she hefted it, aimed, and immediately began shooting at the stormtroopers coming through the gap. Marasiah's white blade lashed out, batting back every shot before it landed on them, ignoring the ones that would go wide. She reached out with the Force and joined with the old woman, the aunt she'd never known. She shared with Marin her every intention, and every shot Marin popped off skimmed around, beneath, or above her flashing lightsaber.

It was the kind pure combat connection Marasiah had once shared with her husband. There was no thought or emotion, only instinct and reflex flowing smoothly through the Force. Staying back-to-back, Marasiah deflected, Marin shot, and together they took down five more stormtroopers. They were building a white-armored barricade in front of that hole, and when the last soldier dropped both women stopped to lower their weapons and catch their breath. Their Force-connection weakened but Marasiah could feel her aunt's wordless question: *What next?*

The answer was prompt. Sending soldiers one-after-another through the narrow gap was proving unsuccessful. The hangar's door was heavy, but nothing one missile couldn't tear through. They heard it launch a second before impact, and that was just enough time to raise a Force-shield around themselves to protect them from a potentially bone-crunching concussive wave. The hangar door was torn halfway apart; superheated metal curved inward, allowing blinding smoke and choking ash to surround them, and Marasiah could barely see the next squad of stormtroopers as it plunged into the swirl.

She could still feel them in the Force, and that was all the vision she needed.

Marasiah charged, bare feet pounding the debris-strewn floor. Her lightsaber batted back laserfire until she got close enough to strike down one stormtrooper, then another. She was in the middle of them now and they skirted away, shooting as they did so. Some dropped to Marin's laser blasts but Marasiah took most of them down, one after another after another. More troopers swung in from the still-hovering

airspeeder. The thing must be about emptied by now but Marasiah kept fighting.

Some laser blasts got through her defenses; stun bolts winged her hip, her shoulder, her left arm. Tingling danced through her nerves but she kept fighting. Her bare feet skipped across shrapnel, tore, and started to bleed but she kept moving and she kept killing.

The calm, egoless union she'd shared with Marin was gone. She could barely feel the old woman at all. Instead Marasiah found herself swept away by emotion. For every trooper she cut down her mind flashed on the man who commanded them, the man who'd used her and betrayed her and destroyed her father, the man she'd loved and trusted, the man who was the only real family she had left.

Thinking of Hogrum filled her with hot anger and the anger fueled her. Her half-numb arm and bleeding feet didn't bother her. She moved and slashed and killed and felt pure power well up inside her, chasing away all her hurt. Her body was sure, her hands steady, as she cut down one soldier after another.

When the last white-shelled corpse fell to her feet Marasiah stood panting, looked around the hangar, and felt vicious pride swell in her. She had the Force and all the power of a Skywalker; all her uncle had were schemes and pawns. When the time came- and she was sure it would- she'd deal with him as she'd dealt with his minions.

And then her attention settled on Marin, standing apart from the carnage, rifle dangling at her side. The old woman's shock reverberated through the Force and in a flash Marasiah saw what she saw: a woman in torn and dirty clothes, lightsaber buzzing in her hand, faceless victims piled around her bloody feet into a low rampart. And that woman's face, half hidden by long sweat-matted hair, was twisted by a vicious glee.

She saw what Marin saw and she felt Marin's shock. She realized the dark frenzy that had consumed her, remembered her father's fate, and felt a tremor of shame. Shame, but not regret.

And then, without warning, the airspeeder hovering beyond the blown-open door exploded. Another shock wave

scorched across the hangar, and only Marin had the reflexes to throw up another Force-shield. The airspeeder was already on its way down, a falling fireball trailing black smoke. Through the gnarled gap Marasiah saw slanting laserfire and, she thought, a pair of TIEs chasing a Crossfire. She felt dull surprise; she'd thought the fighting was finally over.

Then she heard the roar of starship engines and saw the blocky, familiar form of Ania Solo's freighter fill the gap. The landing ramp lowered and the ship edged itself closer, but even with the partially-blown door there was no way it could fit inside. They'd have to use the Force to jump.

A figure clambered halfway down the ramp and, hanging on to a landing strut, waved them ahead. It was a tall man, pale with a shaved-bald head. He felt familiar in the Force, though, and with a shock Marasiah recognized Ganner Krieg.

After the killing spree she was afraid to actively call on the Force again; it would open the floodgates to all those dark urges. She hesitated before moving toward the ship, but Marin called, "Go!"

The urgency in her voice was stunning, but then Marasiah felt it too: more people, approaching fast. She took two painful steps before the doorway at the far end of the hangar, the one leading into the skyscraper's abandoned bowels, opened wide, and more stormtroopers came pouring through.

"Go!" Marin repeated, and raised her blaster to fire.

The stormtroopers unleashed a wave of blue stun bolts. Marasiah called on the Force because she had to; she caught the first ones aimed at her, turned and started running. She spread her awareness, sensing Ganner in the air ahead of her, the troopers surging behind, Marin desperately trying to run interference. Marasiah turned off her saber and bounded ahead, trailing bloody footprints across the debris-strewn floor. When she got to the gnarled, still-smoking gap she threw her body into a leap. The Force lifted her higher, carrying her through the gap, into the air, and onto the slanting landing pad.

As soon as her feet hit the deck they slipped and Ganner threw an arm around her waist to keep her from falling. "Empress!" he shouted, "Get inside!"

She looked back at the gap and into the hangar, just in time to see Marin turn from the approaching stormtroopers and make her own run for it. The old woman got two steps before a stun bolt caught her in the back and dropped her in the middle of the chamber. Some stormtroopers immediately surrounded her; others rushed ahead to begin shooting at *Free Agent*.

Marasiah stared at her aunt's crumpled form in wordless shock. Ganner, still holding her by the waist, shouted to someone inside the ship, "Take us up! Take us up *now*!"

The ship surged. The skyscraper, its blown-open gap, and the bodies inside shrank and fell away.

Ania barely recognized her cousin when she staggered into the cockpit. Her clothes, just loose white pajamas, were torn, dirty, and scorched. What looked like red shoes were, on second glance, feet coated in fresh blood. The streak of dyed-white in her tangled hair was the only thing marking her as an empress.

Nonetheless, Marasiah lurched into the cockpit as AG-37 punched *Free Agent* skyward. She grabbed onto the rear seats, currently occupied by Azlyn Rae and Treis Sinde, for stead. Ania twisted in her co-pilot's seat and said, "Get her back to sick bay, now."

"I'm trying," Ganner said as he half-held Marasiah up. "She's refusing to go."

Of course she'd be stubborn; Ania's cousin was nothing but. Even though the ship was shaking, Sinde rose from his feet and guided Marasiah into it. "Get something for her feet," he told Azlyn. "Hurry."

"I'll be... all right..." Marasiah croaked as Azlyn darted from the cockpit.

"You'd better be. We came a long way to save your butt and we're not out of it yet," Ania said. "How's my mom?"

Almost too soft to hear, Marasiah said, "We left her behind."

Ania spun back and grabbed her cousin by the shoulder. "What do you mean you *left her*?"

"They took her with a stun blast," Ganner said, "There's nothing we can do."

Ania wanted to shout that there was something they *could* do, and that was turn the damn ship around, fly back there, bust into the hangar with their somewhat-able-bodied crew, and get Marin back, because if she'd known she was going to have to exchange her mother for Marasiah on this mission she'd have never volunteered.

But AG-37, in the reasonable tones only a droid could manage, said, "I'm sorry, Ania, but a group of TIEs are approaching from the rear and will be on us shortly. Rogue Squadron is coming to help but there is nothing we can do for Marin at this time."

Ania wanted to argue; all she got out was an incoherent shout. As she pounded her console in anger, the ship began to rock as laser blasts hit their rear shields. They were soaring straight into the sky now, pushing through thin cloud layers into the upper atmosphere. Lights were visible in the darkening space above; stars or starships waiting to kill them, Ania couldn't tell.

Ganner, who'd dropped into Azlyn's seat, checked auxiliary sensors and reported, "Rogue Squadron is coming up behind us. They've taken out one TIE."

Good news didn't make Ania feel better. As her mind groped for what to do next Azlyn returned with a wet cloth and bandages. As the ship rocked under more fire she bent down and began to clean and wrap Marasiah's cut-up feet.

The empress barely noticed. She lifted her head, looked Ania in the eyes, and said, "I am so sorry." Her voice cracked with regret.

The sight shocked some of Ania's anger away. Until now she'd only ever seen Marasiah as an empress: regal and commanding, clean, dressed in robes and crowned in gold. Even after getting injured on the Floating World she'd retained her dignity. The woman in front of her now was a dirty, bloodied mess, but one look in those eyes said the damage she'd taken inside was even worse.

*Free Agent* rocked violently, breaking their shared gaze. Ania looked at her scanners and saw a few TIEs still hanging close behind. Evasive maneuvers would cost them speed AG-37 wasn't willing to sacrifice, and he plowed a straight line into space, trusting the Rogues to clear away the TIEs.



Within a minute they did. The faster Crossfires surged ahead, settling on their flanks and in front of them. Anj Dahl's familiar voice buzzed in their cockpit, saying, "Your back's clear. Do you have the empress?"

Ania couldn't bring herself to speak, but AG-37 replied, "Marasiah Fel is safely aboard. We'd appreciate it if you cleared the way ahead of us."

"Thanks. Sensors say it doesn't look too bad. Relatively."

"Good. Please do your best to ensure us a clear flight path."

"You got it."

Anj clicked out. The Crossfires pushed further and Ania watched their thrust-trails as they began engaging the TIEs sent to intercept them. Atmosphere fell away and they were surrounded fully by stars. Lasers and explosions flashed ahead but *Free Agent* plunged toward the fray, unerring.

Ania watched the life-and-death struggle without fear or anxiety. All her thoughts went to her mother left behind. Hopefully the troopers hadn't seen her use the Force. Hopefully she could pass herself off as some random mercenary hired to help the empress. Hopefully Hogrum Chalk would buy the excuse. Hopefully she'd stay alive long enough to be helped.

The Rogues scattered most of the TIEs ahead of *Free Agent*. The wreckage of one dead star destroyer, flanked by two live ones, sat far off their starboard side, and none of the big ships seemed to notice their flight. As the lights TIEs were cleared away the Rogues once more settled into protective formation around *Free Agent*.

"Hey," Anj called, "Do you still have the coordinates for the fleet?"

"We do," replied AG-37. "Should we rendezvous there?"

"As good a place as any. I'll call ahead and make sure they're ready to receive the package."

Ania looked over her shoulder at that package. Marasiah's feet had been bandaged but the rest of her was still a mess. Her head was bent low and brown-and-white tangles obscured her face.

The ship lurched and Ania looked out the viewport just in time to see starlines explode into blazing light. Hyperspace

flashed around them, encasing them in its ethereal glow. It didn't feel like escape at all.

AG-37 turned from the controls and spun his chair to face Marasiah. "We have successfully escaped the Coruscant system. We are now in the process of a multi-jump journey to Admiral Bey's fleet. This will take some time and I recommend you go to sick bay to be thoroughly examined."

"I am fine," the empress said, voice dull.

"You should at least get washed and put some real clothes on," Ania said. "Stang, you can borrow mine."

Once the thought of fitting into Ania's less-than-regal garb might have made Marasiah scowl in disdain. Instead she nodded her head dully. "Thank you."

"Come, Majesty," Treis Sinde said, "Let's get you cleaned up."

He, Azlyn, and Ganner helped her stand up. Wincing, she shuffled on bandaged feet out the rear door, taking all three Knights with her.

The cockpit was suddenly empty. As Ania deflated into her seat, AG-37 watched her with both photoreceptors.

She watched him back. "You know what we have to do now, right?"

"I would advise against haste," the droid said. "We have no idea where your mother will be taken or how she'll be dealt with by her captors."

"All the more reason not to waste time. As soon as we drop off the empress we're turning back around and getting my mom."

"Given our exit from Coruscant, it would not be wise of us to return in this vessel. It would be noticed."

Ania hadn't even thought of that. It was a good point, but her resolve still stood. "I don't care what we have to do," she told him. "I'm going back to Coruscant and I'm getting her out. And I'll tear down anyone who gets in my way."

## Chapter Thirty

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They approached the eruption slowly, a loose semicircle edging closer one step at a time. High grass and short brush crowded them to the waist but all kept eyes on the luminous pillar that stabbed into the sky.

Jariah could feel it. It was powerful raw, dangerous, uncontrollable. His every instinct was to run away from the thing, but Cade was in it. Sometimes the light shuddered, weakening for split-seconds, and he could see his friend unmistakably suspended in the bright fountainhead.

"It is as you've said," Khat Lah breathed, "He has been... joined with the eruption in some way."

"But what does that *mean*?" Kyra asked. She hugged herself as though chilled, and Jariah could feel the fear emanating off her.

"I always suspected the eruptions are bridges to another plane of the Force," said Khat Lah, "The one to which the Whills ascended. It seems that Cade Skywalker, too, is a bridge..."

Jariah didn't understand what they were talking about and didn't care. "How do we get him out?"

"It may not be possible..."

"Yeah, you said they already. How do we *try*?"

Lowbacca gave a thoughtful roar and Kyra said, "You're right... I feel him too in there... Just a little."

Jariah watched the light. He tried to peer deeper, with his eyes and with the Force-senses he was just beginning to find control over. When it flickered he saw Cade again and he felt

him too, a tiny bit. Cade's was a powerful will straining to be released, but it was stamped down by something even more powerful. Jariah sensed his friend's battle but couldn't tell what Cade was fighting toward: escape or ascension.

"I feel him too," he said. "We have to do *something*."

"There is no telling what may happen if we reach for him," Khat Lah said.

"Well you should've thought of that *before* you sent him in there," Jariah snarled. "Maybe if we all work together we can, I don't know, drag him out."

Collective effort had worked to open the gate; he prayed it worked here. Lowbacca roared encouragingly and stretched out a long arm, as though grasping for the light. Kyra did the same. Eli, standing beside her, closed his eyes, and with that weird wordless certainty Jariah knew the kid was also reaching toward the light, seeking Cade.

There was still too much Jariah didn't understand about all this. He had no idea why none of his weird ghosts had shown up yet; during that brawl on the hillside it seemed like everyone had thrown into the ring. He had even less of an idea what was happening with Cade. All he knew was that his brother was trapped against his will and needed release.

Jariah didn't stretch out but he did squeeze his eyes shut to concentrate. As red pressed his eyelids he realized how quiet it was; that this explosion should be so soundless was terrifying. Locked in silence and seeing red he tried to concentrate on Cade. He thought of their first collision over Ossus and everything that had happened then, all the insane schemes and close calls they'd dragged each other through, even the noble destiny they'd fulfilled, which was the weirdest thing of all.

A private revelation spread inside him. Jariah had summoned no ghosts in this world because he had no ghosts to summon. Being gifted and cursed with the Force, through no desire of his own, had washed his old life clean, taking away any regrets he might have had. When the Force touched him all his fears and anxieties became focused on the future and that future was now.

If this damned power was going to do him any good, it was right here.

His memories found resonance in the light ahead. He found the resonance and willed himself to grasp it with his mind. Amidst all the formless surging energy there was a coherent particle that was Cade and he tried to hold it steady as it flickered in and out of existence. He felt Kyra and Eli trying to do it too, and Lowbacca reaching with a far stronger hand than any.

And soon he felt the Yuuzhan Vong join in, even Khat Lah, though he trembled with fear of what they might unleash. Nine minds joined together for a singular purpose; nine minds from different species, orders, civilizations, galaxies, all merged together for a singular will. Jariah felt them all and felt their will touch Cade. They held him and his presence grew steady.

Jariah dared open his eyes and saw his friend still suspended in the light but constant and visible. It seemed like a single touch could pry him free. He took a step closer. The other minds shouted *Stop* in unison, and in a rush Jariah understood that if he brushed the light it would destroy him.

Only a Skywalker could endure, and maybe not forever. He was tantalizing and close, but still impossible to grasp, and Jariah felt a swell of helplessness. None of them had any idea what to do.

And then, faint and precious like hope, they felt Cade touch them back.

Where Cade Skywalker was, there was neither space nor time. Light was dark and form was void, and he was just a tiny speck against an immensity, existing only because that immensity had bestowed some of itself up on his speck long before he was born.

The tiny speck was overflowed with knowledge, and his mortal mind could process only a little of it. But as the knowledge sank into him and became him Cade found a decision.

He was not, generally a man concerned with justice. He wanted what he wanted and did what he thought was best without constructing reasons that were usually just fancy words rationalizing self-service. He was not, or had not been, overly concerned with right and wrong.

Nonetheless, he felt that what the Whills had done was a crime.

They had explained it all to him. For millions of years life had existed in this galaxy and every galaxy, growing in the Living Force and becoming so great it could ascend to a higher plane and join with the Cosmic Force to direct its flow. Then, tens of millennia ago but a mere blink of cosmic time, that had changed. The last great civilizations in this galaxy had ascended and taken the Living Force with them, sealing it off from their violent servant-races like the Rakata, allowing only bits of its power to touch beings gifted with pieces of themselves called midi-chlorians. Tens of millenia ago they'd bottled the Force up, stripping the beings of this galaxy of that power with only a little more mercy than ancient Yuuzhan'tar when it had stripped the Yuuzhan Vong.

*What I don't get, Cade told the form and void around him, is why you didn't just take the Force from us entirely.*

His answer came from nowhere and everywhere, an individual being and every Whill. *We are not cruel. The Force is life and all life exists in the Force. By granting you midi-chlorians we allowed the fortunate among you to know that and touch some of its beauty. Yet it is the nature of sentience to corrupt. The Force grants power and power turns hearts black. We know from experience that civilizations which draw on the Force too deeply are drawn to its dark side. They come savage and destructive. We have prevented those horrors from occurring. More, we have prevented them from joining the Cosmic Force. Everything that rises must converge here, and for those evils to ascend would darken us all.*

He knew some of what they meant. The ancient Yuuzhan Vong and Rakata had apparently existed in close communion with the Force, and their powers had allowed them to become monstrous.

*But that's not fair, he protested. Just because some long-dead murglacks mucked up their chance to use the Force right doesn't mean everybody else should lose it.*

*Look at your own memories, Cade Skywalker. Think on the history you were taught. Force-users have wrought great things but even more they have brought destruction.*

Again, he had to admit their point. Without the power of the dark side, Darth Krayt would never have been able to wreak his ruin across the galaxy. At most he'd have gone out like Nihl: a petty warlord betrayed and gunned down, his empire collapsing fast in his wake.

And yet, Cade couldn't accept it. Maybe he was a *vermo* who couldn't see the big picture. Maybe he just had problems with authority. Either way, he'd acted on instinct and reached into the Whills and past them, through the Cosmic Force and to an even higher plane that lay beyond. That Force existed beyond even the Whills, strong and pure, and for a timeless moment he'd been sure he could grab hold of it and become a bridge across forever, connecting his mortal plan with the highest stage of the universe.

The Whills had reacted violently. Though he'd fought them their will was too strong; they'd broken the bridge, overpowered him, trapped and contained him within this place that was no place, the hole three long-dead Banite Sith had carved in the Cosmic Force and which Anakin Skywalker had been created to fill. The Whills could not touch him here, only besiege him.

*You know, he told them, You're the ones who gave me the powers of the Chosen One. You gonna revoke them now?*

*We can revoke nothing. The Chosen One was made to restore balance.*

*Yeah, I got that part. You Whills can make the Force flow, taint it light and dark, but you can't directly interfere in our plane, just nudge people now and then. Plagueis and Sidious broke into your house and messed up the furniture, so you figured you had to do something. You created Anakin Skywalker, infused him with a little of your own power, and set him loose, because that's all you could do. Well, he had free will and so do I.*

*Even the descendant of the Chosen One does not have the power to do what you attempt.*

*So you say. You stopped me before I could find out for sure. What are you going to do, keep me here forever?*

*There is no forever. Time and space are concepts that only exist within the Living Force.*

*Then what are you going to do?*

The Whills gave no reply. The crowded him but gave him only silence. Cade struggled, sensing for something beside them. He hoped to find that window on the purest Force again; when he'd touched that power he'd been sure that, if he grasped it a little tighter, he could overcome even the Whills.

He found no hint of the ultimate wellspring; what he found instead was something far smaller but more familiar. He felt the faint pressure of mortal minds. He felt Khat Lah in awe, Kyra with new determination, Eli with uncharacteristic calm, and he began to wonder how long he'd been stuck like this.

He felt other minds too. Some were unfamiliar. Some, like Lowbacca's, gave comfort. He thought he felt Jariah of all the people, which made no sense at all, but his friend persisted in reaching toward him in the Force. His striving was weak and unfocused compared to the others' but it made up for that lack with sheer conviction.

All those varied minds were united in a single goal. They wanted to free Cade from this place and pull him back to their realm.

He didn't know if that was possible, but he had to try. Struggling against the crowding power of the Whills, he strained out of nothing, into space and time. He became a bridge again and again the Whills tried to keep him on this place.

This time it was different. This time he had friends on the other side, and his friends took his outstretched self and held on tight.

It was a tug-of-war, with Cade as the prize stretched between strong-willed mortals and powers no mind could grasp. Lowbacca realized this, and he knew there was no chance they could win.

Inside he despaired. They'd crossed impossible distances and fought impossible battles but in the end, finally, they'd come up against something they could not defeat. Looking back it was inevitable; they were dealing with powers beyond the scope of the Living Force which they knew.

But even as he wilted, the others were strong. Cade was touching back, and the strengthening of his presence renewed



them, Kyra and Jariah most of all. Lowbacca started pulling again. As he felt Cade's presence he tried to think of all the other Skywalkers and all the other ghosts. He doubted he could summon their forms again but he searched for the part himself they'd instilled with their power, then tried to bring that power to the bear and use it to pull Cade free.

From outside and within he felt a rush of energy. He pulled Cade harder and felt the others pull too; his strength became their strength. Lowbacca dared open his eyes and stare into the pillar of blinding light. Cade was hovering steadily there, arms and legs stretched wide, head tilted back, a mane of messy hair falling from it. Lowbacca focused on that body, with his eyes and with the Force, and he understood it *was* a body, flesh and bone, form within space and time as it had been when Cade first entered the eruption.

They'd accomplished this much. Now they just had to pull him out of the light.

Lowbacca tried to grab that body with the Force and move it, but Cade stayed centered in the eruption. Another power was trying to anchor him there; the edges of his body started to flicker as he lost his anchor in the mortal plane.

They had to act now. Lowbacca staggered forward, one long step, then another. The others shouted warning at him in the Force: *The energy will destroy you. Stay back.* Lowbacca begged them to lend him their strength, and at the same time he reached within himself for all his beloved ghosts, and he prayed to them to send him some of their power.

His answer came, but not as he'd expected. His ghosts had joined the Cosmic Force, and that meant they were part of the plane from which Cade was struggling to escape. Their mortal selves, assumed into the greater flow, didn't have the integrity or the strength of the Whills, who'd ascended purposefully. Nonetheless, they were part of it, and on Lowbacca's pleading they acted on the other side and loosened its grip on Cade. The flickering stopped; his body became clear again. Lowbacca marched forward.

His companions still begged him to stop. He knew there was no other way. It had to be done, and he was the only one who could do it. Calm and certainty filled him. He was a Jedi Master, with a hundred and fifty years of griefs and joys and

loves and hates, and every second of them had contributed to the power inside him now, power he was realizing now for the first and final time. Like the eruption in front of him he was a fountain, and he opened himself up to become a new light.

Before stepping through the gate, Lowbacca had promised C-3PO and R2-D2 that he'd bring Cade back, and he'd made it without hesitation. He owed more than he could say to every Skywalker he'd known, and he'd be a poor Wookiee if he didn't pay off his debts. More, he'd been a part of the Skywalker story for so long, as they'd been part of his. It was all he could do to follow along with it as far as he was able.

His long arms reached out. Impossible energy rendered fur from flesh and flesh from bone. The pain was excruciating but lifted by his ghosts, Lowbacca had enough strength to pull. One tug was all it took to rip Cade Skywalker's body from the heart of the eruption and hurl it into the grass beyond, where his friends waited.

Promise kept.

It was Lowbacca's last thought before the Force overwhelmed him, dissolved him, and carried him away.

The gateway towered above them, a hollow arch alone on a desolate plain. Though Kyra knew it was powered by the Force and powerful with it, it felt like a dead thing now.

Soft wind moved around them as they returned to the gate. It had been a long, slow march from the place where they'd pulled Cade from the eruption, and in that time they'd watched things change. The fountain of light had died first; without Cade held in its center it flickered, shortened, and finally dissolved. A groundquake had accompanied the darkening like a death-rattle.

As they walked back to the hypergate, they saw other light-pillars dwindle and die, until only a few remained on the horizon. The groundquakes seemed to stop, and the once-strong wind started to die. They went past patches of plants gone brown and dry. Once-bright stalks were withered, dropping dead petals. With stunning quickness, the planet was returning to the near-lifeless state it had existed as for millions of years. It seemed like they were going to leave it

much like they had found it, though the same could not be said for them.

Kyra had opened her eyes for Lowbacca's last moments. She'd seen the great Wookiee silhouetted against the pillar's blinding light, in the center of which Cade's body hovered. As she'd squinted through slit eyes she'd seen Lowbacca grow bright as well, until every strand of fur on the Wookiee's great body had seemed to glow with its own light. Then Lowbacca has grabbed Cade by the arm and pulled him out; the eruption had flared so bright Kyra had been forced to close her eyes, and when she'd opened them again, Cade lay in the grass, the eruption was dwindling like a starved candle, and Lowbacca was gone.

Cade came out of the light with energy and a clear mind, at least compared to when he'd fallen clear of the Tho Yor on Tython. He explained little of what had happened to him inside the eruption; he said he needed time to process. Everyone understood; they'd spend the rest of their lives, however long, thinking on what had happened to them in this strange place.

As she looked up at the gate's stony arch, Kyra knew she'd become a different person than when she'd first passed through. The Force had given her strength; she had realized her own purpose. Strength within became strength without, and purpose dictated its own action. The problems she'd face on the other side of the gate, the side from which she'd come, were different from the ones she'd faced here, but she believed she'd found a way to deal with them.

As she'd told Eli, they were the precious beings who could use the Force. They'd been blessed by a speck of godhood and not to use that for the greater good would be both wasteful and cowardly. Seeing Lowbacca at his end- his great power manifest, and the bravery of his final sacrifice- made that purpose even stronger. It was an example she could only crave to live up to.

As for Eli, he seemed different as well. She was confident he'd turned away from the dark, and the crippling indecision that had taken him earlier was gone. During the long walk he'd confided in her that he'd faced his ghosts on the sidelines of the last spectral battle. He'd turned off his

lightsaber and let them strike, relinquishing his hatred for them and anger toward the Jedi and the Sith. The five Duros had burst to flecks of swirling light and dissolved, just like the dead Sith who'd haunted Cade.

In a low voice, the kind saved for the most intimate secret, Eli had told her that he'd never felt more liberated in his life.

Even if she could not share that feeling, Kyra was glad for him. She didn't know what he meant to do when they crossed the gate. It seemed to her they were on divergent paths, though she couldn't guess where they might lead. The knowledge that he'd taken her holocron, or at least thrown it aside, still nagged at her. When they got back to Rohakalla, perhaps, she'd confront him about it.

For now, though, the gate loomed high above them, promising a return to everything, though they were sure to find everything changed simply because of the changes in themselves.

Khat Lah and the other Yuuzhan Vong concentrated and drew power from the Force. Kyra joined with them this time, and she felt her power surge outward and infuse with the arch's ancient machinery. When the light-beams appeared it felt like sparks within her. They interlaced to form a perpendicular grid, then grew thicker and brighter, and it was like she glowed with an inner fire. Finally, the entire portal became a wall of light.

Kyra felt a tremor beside her and looked to Eli. As he stared into the gate, she knew, he was thinking of the bright white that had captured Cade and consumed Lowbacca.

"It's all right," she told him. "Over there is where we belong."

"Yes," he swallowed.

As Khat Lah took the first step into the gate she added, "Everything will be different when we go through."

"I know. I won't hesitate any longer."

The other Yuuzhan Vong stepped into the light and were enveloped by it. Then went Jariah, and then Cade. Head lifted, frightened but brave, Eli stepped through as well.

Kyra was right behind him, but before passing from this place she turned to see the barren ancient landscape one last time. She felt a jerk of shock to see two broad silhouettes on

the horizon. The old Jeodu couple was still there, watching her.

She watched them back and felt no fear. They were only ghosts, and ghosts couldn't harm her. Confident of that, Kyra turned her back on them and walked through the gate.



## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

As they neared their journey's end, all the Je'daii were all close to breaking.

Lanoree Brock couldn't remember how many jumps it had taken them to reach this place. Bright dead stars, swirling gasses, and gleaming nebulae crowded them on all sides. She'd never felt claustrophobic in space until now. In the deepest of the Deep Core, ancient stars and stellar debris formed a tangled wall around their destination and the Tho Yor had guided them carefully through, like one thread passing through the eye of a hundred needles.

Even without the Rakata in pursuit, such effort would have strained the Je'daii. With it, they were about to fall apart. Lanoree didn't understand how, but they'd chased the ragtag fleet as it descended deeper into the Core, hounding it whenever the two factions caught up in realspace. This time they didn't hesitate to mark the Je'daii-piloted gunship as hostile and fire upon it. They went after it as mercilessly as they did the Gree and Kwa vessels, which were at least able to defend themselves. The Force-meld that fueled the Je'daii ship was increasingly difficult to maintain as they struggled to evade heavy fire. Every blast that gouged the ship's hull felt like burning knife stabbing through Lanoree's skin.

The remaining Tho Yor did the best they could to help. The two double-pyramids released bursts of deadly energy that broke apart many Rakatan ships, but the attackers kept coming. When one of the ancient arks exploded the pain of its dying agony, pain that carried the essence of Tasha Ryo,

temporarily broke the Je'daii meld and left them defenseless. More laser blasts scored their ship. It was a struggle to orient themselves again.

Their destination, and possible salvation, lay ahead. From a distance the world looked barren as it swung around its red dying sun, but the Force power it emanated was like nothing else. It reminded Lanoree somewhat of Tython, more of the place inside the giant monolith, but it was a world all its own.

The hard part was reaching it. As the mind-meld sputtered so did their vessel, and more lasers rocked them. Panic spread through the meld like contagion, weakening it further, and Lanoree felt sick dread spread inside. It would be terrible to come this close to her destiny but fail in the end.

"Lanoree! Ranger Brock, wake up!"

She forced her eyes open and stared into Master Quan-Jang's black lenses. He shook her shoulder and said, "Get up! Come quickly!"

He helped Lanoree remove herself from the meditation couch. She staggered out of the vault as fast as she could but the hits were constant now, and the ship never stopped rocking. As soon as they got out of the chamber, but before they reached the bridge, Quan-Jang grabbed her by both shoulders and said, "You need to get out of this ship, now. Take the Gree device, put it on the Hunter, and fly clear. We'll protect you."

Even with a garbled mind she understood what he intended. "No. Not a chance. We're all getting to that planet together."

"We will, but we can't take the chance that Gree device gets destroyed."

*Dal's device*, she corrected in her head. She had killed her own brother because of it; it could never be anyone's but his. "What do you expect me to do? Just run for it?"

"No. We'll slow down and hold them off. We'll fight better if we're not trying to run." He squeezed her shoulders. "The Gree and Kwa are taking damage. They're sending down their own landers and will help cover you."

"Tasha will help too," Hawk Ryo said as he trotted into the corridor. Before Lanoree could say anything he shoved an object into her hands: Master A'nang's holocron. "Take it," he said. "You'll need a translator if nothing else."



Lanoree wanted to shout objection and say that if they'd made it this far together they could make it the rest of the way, but that was a lie. The gunship rocked around them; its artificial air carried the whiff of smoke.

"Get out of here, Ranger Brock." Quan-Jang released her shoulders. "May the Force be with you."

Lanoree clasped the holocron in both hands. "We'll meet up on the surface," she told him.

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and ran. Hawk followed. The Hunter sat where she'd left it after their return from the monolith. The gunship's cargo containers were in an adjoining section and Lanoree knew exactly which one contained Dal's device. With Hawk's help she carried it and wedged it right inside the Hunter's cargo hold, beneath the passenger seat. She prayed she wouldn't have to crash-land.

That done, Lanoree pushed open the cockpit bubble and grabbed her flight helmet. Hawk stood at the fighter's nose and called to her, "Be careful out there!"

"You too! And give your niece some gratitude!"

"She knows," Hawk said. "Tasha's in this with us."

He said with firmest belief. Lanoree didn't understand how one Je'daii seer- young and by all accounts not that powerful- had been able to spread her consciousness the across nine Tho Yor. She wondered what bits of Tasha Ryo lay waiting over Tython or submerged on that ocean planet, and she wondered how much longer Tasha would have to wait for her destiny to be complete.

Lanoree knew hers lay ahead. She sat down inside the Hunter, sealed the cockpit, and fired engines. When Hawk left the hangar she opened the doors and pushed the ship out into space.

The battle was thick in orbit over the planet. Lanoree wheeled around the gunship to give herself a view of the battle. Rakatan attackers were swarming all around, focusing mainly on the Je'daii vessel, the larger Kwa cruisers, and the Gree city-ships. The smaller Gree vessels darted swiftly about of their solar sails, and whatever weapons the craft had packed an oversized punch. Larger spherical vessels, also with solar sails, were falling toward the planet. Lanoree marked them as Gree shuttles and darted to follow.

Gree fighters hung back, intercepting the Rakatan ships that tried to pursue. At the same time the one remaining Tho Yor was an aggressive blaze. Destructive light was constantly streaming from its black-stone hull. The Rakata, determined to destroy the greatest threat, literally threw themselves at it. Even as she plunged toward the planet Lanoree kept jerking her ship and twisting in the cockpit to see the battle behind her. She watched as a Kwa cruiser exploded, and when one of the Je'daii ship's three arms was ripped off she felt agony through the residual mind-meld.

And when the last Tho Yor broke apart, rammed by a pair of suicidal Rakatan cruisers, the pain made her scream in her cockpit. In its last moments the Tho Yor felt so powerful, so vivid, so Je'daii. Lanoree felt the last moments of Tasha Ryo- that speck of her- and knew every part of the Twi'lek seer. She felt her insecurity, the pressures of her warring parents, frustration at the elusiveness of the Force and a yearning for transcendence. Finally, she felt Tasha's grim satisfaction at a mission fulfilled.

The Tho Yor broke apart. Brilliant light flared from inside its cracked stone shell. Pain rippled through the Force, but only for a moment. When the light died, that trace of Tasha Ryo was gone.

The calm lasted only a second. The remaining Rakatan ships, and there were few now, fell on the Je'daii gunship. Its last moments were as vivid and strong as the Tho Yor's. Lanoree felt more agony as laser-blasts tore the gunship apart. She felt panic surge through the distant mind-meld and finally break it. She felt scattered fear and despair and resignation amongst all the Je'daii behind her, and in the frenzy she couldn't make out the signatures of Master Quan-Jang or Hawk Ryo.

She couldn't do anything except reach back to them through the Force and tried to share some solace with all those twenty-eight doomed minds.

*It's all right, she tried to tell them. You did what you had to do. You finished your destiny. You didn't die for nothing.*

She didn't think her message got through. She might as well have tried telling Dal. When the gunship finally exploded, one extra star in the tight-packed sky, she felt it

through the Force. Their agony blazed, and she screamed again.

But pain cleared fast, and Lanoree knew she couldn't let grief blind her.

The planet was coming on her fast. Forcing the pain from her mind she grabbed the Hunter's control stick and wrestled it to submission. Friction flamed against her cockpit as she entered the atmosphere. When it fell away, she soared high above the surface and tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

The landscape was as barren as the surface or an airless moon. She spotted mountains, ridges, wide open swathes of desert or dried sea, a few clusters of craters. Yet the world had air and more, it was alive in the Force. She found herself drawn toward the strange pillars of light stabbing from earth into sky. From this altitude she could see several of them and banked toward the closest. As she drew nearer, Lanoree saw something dark and lush packed around the light: a living forest. Even circling high above she could feel the life there, and she could feel the incredible Force-energy exploding out of that white geyser. She steered her Hunter well clear of it, afraid to touch something so potent.

A noise crackled over her comlink, and it took her a moment to realize it was a Gree trying to speak to her. She didn't have the holocron with her to translate; she'd stashed it underneath with Dal's device. Instead she checked her sensors and saw Gree shuttles descending several hundred kilometers away. As she changed course and vectored toward them, Lanoree checked her long-range scanners for a glimpse of the battle above. Against so many bright stars it was hard to spot explosions in the sky, but she caught a few. Her scanners told her the Rakatan vessels were almost destroyed. The last Kwa cruisers and Gree city-ships were putting them down. She felt no relief at that; the cost had been far too high.

She vectored toward the Gree shuttles and began to descend toward the surface. She was still several hundred meters over the plain when everything went wrong. The Hunter simply *stopped*. In a single second the cockpit lights went out and the engines died. Momentum continued to carry her through the air but she was on a fast downward dive. She jabbed

buttons to restart the engines and wrenched the control stick but nothing happened. It was like inside the monolith; the ship simply stopped working.

Lanoree went giddy with fear. After coming this far, sacrificing so much, it couldn't end like this. The earth rushed up to meet her, faster and faster. *She* couldn't end like this. She thought of Dal's device tucked into the Hunter's undercarriage and that fleeting thought as she climbed aboard that she didn't want to crash-land.

In seconds she would not only crash, she'd destroy Dal's device and their shared destiny along with the Hunter. Lanoree jammed buttons, pounded the cockpit walls, jerked the control stick, all to no help. She had no power.

No power except the Force. Death was seconds away. Lanoree grasped for calm. She tried to hold onto the falling ship, buffer it and slow it. The Force was so strong here it was easy to command; despite her panic she found she was slowing. That was good, but it wouldn't be enough. At best she'd manage a crash-landing that would impact the Hunter's undercarriage and destroy the device, maybe even create that dreaded black hole that would eat the entire planet.

There was only one thing to do. Lanoree called on the Force again to slow the ship but also to twist it. The Hunter spun upside-down and soon the earth was her ceiling and the ceiling was falling on her fast. Facing skyward the device might still survive, even if she did not.

Desperately, Lanoree put every effort into lifting the Hunter with invisible hands, and with a surge of elation she felt it raise just a little in defiance of the fall.

Impact came a second after that. After impact, she felt nothing.

The crash-landing didn't kill her, though even after Lanoree awoke she suspected she was in fact dead. It would be the easy explanation for the situation she found herself in.

A mixed group of Gree and Kwa had found her at the crash site, as they'd found the holocron and Dal's device, which were in better shape than her. Several of the Kwa were imbued with Force-healing skills, and though they'd never attempted to fix a human before the Force was so malleable

and potent here that that within several local days, Lanoree's broken ribs and cracked skull had healed. The concussion that clouded her mind faded away and the ugly bruises disappeared from her face. Her left knee had been shattered and Lanoree spent several more local days trying to mend bone herself, with surprising success. Soon she was able to hobble around and explore some of this strange place.

As she'd thought during her initial fly-by, the surface was dusty and lifeless. The air was cool, thin and dry; more curiously, there seemed barely any wind. At night the sky was filled with countless tight-packed stars and in the day an ancient sun bathed the landscape in eerie red. There were no trees, no plants, no animals. No birds wheeled in the sky. Life felt distant, concentrated in those pillars of light scattered across distant horizons.

Unlike her Hunter, the Gree and Kwa ships had apparently landed intact. Lanoree wasn't sure whether that was because their vessels were Force-powered like the Rakata's, or because they'd used collective will to cushion their falls. Either way, the aliens wasted no time. By the time Lanoree was ambulatory, the Gree had already begun constructing the two base pillars of what would become a hypergate arch.

Though she was with dozens of Gree and Kwa, Lanoree felt very much alone. The Je'daii with whom she'd journeyed had all died to secure her passage and there was no one she could talk to. Master A'ngang's holocron was able to translate Kwa hissing and Gree squeals into words for her, but it did little to bridge her to the aliens. Even in the Force they felt strange. Their minds were foreign and so were their hearts, but she picked up a sense of gratitude from them. She had made possible what should have never been. She wanted to tell them that it wasn't her who'd done it, that it had been Quan-Jang and Hawk Ryo and the others, Tasha Ryo in the Tho Yor, her brother Dalien most of all. The holocron had translated their words but not, it seemed, their meaning.

She learned that the Gree city-ships and Kwa cruisers had withdrawn from over this world and were journeying out of the Deep Core. That way the Rakata would be less likely to track them, or so her alien companions said. Lanoree didn't know for sure. All she knew was that she was here, among

strangers, until the gate was complete, and likely for much longer.

Lanoree doubted she'd ever see other Je'daii again. She might live out the rest of her life among these strange beings. If so she'd have to learn how to communicate with them, and she tried to get lessons in their tongues from the holocron, but it was hard to study here.

Her dreams were so vivid. At first she thought it was a side-effect of the Force-healing, then realized it must be this land itself. She had dreams, or perhaps visions, of her training on Tython, her missions across the system as a Ranger, and the awful experiences of the war. Sometimes she found herself peering through the eyes of others.

Once, she dreamed she was Dal. It was during their Great Journey together across Tython, that rite of passage for Je'daii trainees. She felt her brother's alienation like never before, his restlessness, his envy toward his talented big sister. She saw her own eyes widen in shock on her own young face and listened to him decry the Force. He said he hated it for being elusive yet controlling, for promising so much but only giving a little, and for locking the Je'daii away from the rest of the galaxy.

Lanoree had always remembered that speech, but she'd never realized until that vision how deep Dal's anger had run. In his rebellion against the Force he'd rebelled against the universe. His desperate, suicidal attempt to activate the Gree device had been an act of existential revolt.

On waking Lanoree understood her brother better than ever before, but she still didn't know how she could have saved him, and it hurt her all the more.

The day after that, she started seeing ghosts.

She wasn't sure if they really were ghosts. After recovering from her wounds she'd made a few stumbling scouting expeditions, never venturing far from the hill on which the Gree and Kwa had set up a construction camp. Sometimes she'd thought she'd seen more of the aliens on the horizon, as though watching their kin from a far distance. She'd asked them, awkwardly through the holocron, if they'd sent scouts of their own. It seemed they'd had, which explained the occasional sight of distant saurian or cephalopod.

She'd thought that was all, but the day after dreaming of Dal she saw him. He was just a speck on the horizon but clearly human. Disbelieving her own eyes, she'd staggered close enough to make out details. This wasn't the Dal she'd grown up with but the Dal who'd reappeared after nine years' absence, the Dal she'd killed. She marked his receding gray-flecked hair and the scar on his left cheek. He stood on the dusty plain and stared at her.

Lanoree thought she had to be hallucinating. She looked away, looked back. He was still there. Finally she started staggering back to the camp to ask for help, but when she looked over her shoulder he was gone.

A hallucination. After all she'd been through physically and mentally, that was the least she should have to worry about. The Gree and Kwa continued their work. The main pillars of the arch were nearing completion and bending toward a keystone. Inexplicable alien machinery was packed within the metal cage, and then covered with some protective material that ossified in hours, encasing the machinery in natural-looking stone. It was marvelous and strange, and Lanoree tried to focus on the work and her language studies. Anything to take her mind off Dal.

It was impossible not to think of him, though, when they installed his device. The entire arch had been completed, though the top portion had yet to be sealed away in artificial rock. The Gree had placed machinery in the ground beneath the arch's right pillar and she watched the technicians nimbly maneuver the sphere with their tentacles and attach Dal's device to the rest of the machine. They checked their inscrutable machinery; apparently the device was working properly.

It was strange for her to see that ancient module, which had inspired fear in the Je'daii and madness in Dal, treated like any other piece of machinery. The Gree were neither gods nor legends, just beings older and more advanced than the Je'daii. And, she thought, the Gree were dying out, like the Kwa and even the Rakata. The Je'daii were on the rise. Even if she never saw one of her kind again, she knew she wouldn't be the last to leave the Tython system. One day, her kind would spread across the stars, just like Dal had wanted.

Maybe they would keep balance in the Force; maybe they'd stray. Maybe there'd be wars and turmoil, successes and failures, and tens of millennia later the Je'daii would master ancient mysteries that baffled even the Gree and the Kwa.

Maybe one day that mysterious father, not quite a god, would get his wish. Maybe a powerful soul, birthed from the Force and in balance with itself, would come to a work like this and spread its power wide across the stars.

Maybe Dal's madness and her anguish had happened for a reason.

Maybe the Force was their guiding light after all.

Lanoree wanted to believe all those things, and after they installed Dal's device she thought she could. She learned from the Gree that completion of the hypergate was still a local day away. Then tests would be run, and if all went well, they'd activate the device and pair it with its partner, and then they'd step through and be transported from the center of the galaxy to its very edge. It was mind-bending and amazing, and if this was possible, she believed, anything might be.

She kept believing until she awoke that night and saw Dal standing beneath the stars, watching her.

He was only a hundred meters away this time. His sunken eyes and scarred cheek were visible in starlight. Lanoree pushed herself to her feet and stared. Dal remained and more, she could feel him in the Force. All the spite and frustration she'd experienced in her vision was there.

She wondered if the Force wasn't so rich on this world it made her own hallucinations manifest. Cautiously, she stepped forward. She wavered from side to side as she walked; Dal's head shifted to track her.

When she finally stepped close enough to stare into his sullen eyes she dared whisper, "Dal? Is it you?"

He moved on her. Whatever he was, he was more than a hallucination; the first punch hurt. Lanoree staggered a step back, then instinct took over. She raised her arms to deflect his next punch, then snapped one of her own. Dal angled into it, softening the blow as it landed across his chest, but she felt cloth scrape under her knuckles and firm muscle beneath that.



And his spite was strong in the Force, as strong as when she'd killed him the first time.

Lanoree couldn't do it again, even if this was some Force-conjured dream. She deflected his attacks but he kept coming at her with mad determination. Her one knee was still weak and buckled when she was forced to put pressure on it. Dal, or whatever it was, saw the weakness and swiped her lower leg. She was knocked off-balance and fell into his arms.

He grappled with her, one hand in her face, the other against her chest as he tried to push her away. Lanoree wouldn't let him. She wouldn't fight him or kill him; she refused to live through her brother's death a third time. Instead she wrapped arms around his shoulders and pulled him closer. Soundlessly, without even a grunt, he continued to grapple, and shifted the hand from her face to her throat.

His palm wrapped against her windpipe but didn't squeeze. She rasped, "Don't do it, Dal. Not again. I'm so sorry, Dal, about everything that happened to you, but it's *over*."

Starlight reflected in his eyes, so close. They looked so real; he felt so true. She knew his doubt and pressed, "You were right, Dal. You were wrong about so much, but not about where our destiny lies. It's in the stars. Your Gree device is going to open gateways not even you imagined."

His grip on her neck loosened but she held him tight. She was babbling now and didn't care. On this alien world surrounded by alien creature this Force-specter of her brother was the only gateway she needed.

"I'm sorry about what happened to you and what I had to do but it's over. We can't change a thing because everything we did- you and me both- everything mattered. Everything had to happen to get us here and from here... It all ties together. It's all part of the Force. We're part of it, you and me, right here, right now..."

Dal stopped struggling. His arms fell to his side. She squeezed him tighter and suddenly he was gone. Her arms closed on empty space, then around herself. Motes of light swirled upward and disappeared among the stars and then Lanoree was alone on the plain. She looked at the dust and her empty hands, then turned to see the construction camp behind her, the completed arch rising from the hilltop.

She poked her face gently and winced. The hurt was real; the fight was real and whatever of Dal had appeared here was real. She knew that, accepted it, and trusted it, as she'd trusted the Force to bring her this far.

To arrive at this point was the culmination of thousands of years of events. Their complexity and the wills that had orchestrated them defied her understanding, but Lanoree found she didn't need to understand. She only needed what she'd just shared with Dal beneath this alien sky; that alone brought her peace.

Slowly, one knee aching, Lanoree started back toward the hill where the future waited.

The arch's activation was like nothing she'd felt before. She'd joined with the other Je'daii in powering the captured Rakatan gunship but every moment had been a struggle. They'd been wrestling with an alien machine and forcing it to comply to their wishes in ways it wasn't designed for, and even when they'd mastered it a part of the infernal device had still tried to buck them.

Not so with the hypergate. The Gree device was meant to be activated by a Force in balance. Standing among the crowd of aliens she felt them dip into the Force and felt the Force surge around them. As the power grew stronger the light-beams that criss-crossed the inside of the arch became brighter. Soon the entire gateway was a wall of light.

The Gree released an exultant wail and waved tentacles in the air. Though the sound was spine-chilling Lanoree knew it was a cry of triumph and basked in it. Eagerly but in order, the Gree began crawling toward the gate. The Kwa began to march as well. A few, it seemed, would be staying on this side of the gate for now, but most would pass through it, to the other side of the galaxy where, Lanoree had been told, more of their kind would be waiting.

She'd accomplished all she could here. She'd realized that the moment Dalien's specter burst to light in her arms. Without regret, she joined the march and passed through the light.

It enveloped her, warmed her, and released her. Suddenly Lanoree was far away. The air was warm and thicker. The

light was different, a ghostly blue-white, as though cast by mismatched suns. Before her lay the floor of a canyon and a mass of alien bodies packed between stone shelves: more Gree and Kwa, gathered in this place of refuge. This precious bridge between the galaxy's heart and the galaxy's edge.

She felt exultation from the ones who'd passed through and the ones who'd gathered to greet them. And she sensed intense curiosity about her, one lonely little human against so many saurians and cephalopods. Questions were hissed, squealed, and gurgled at her. Blue clawed-tipped hands gently prodded her, and slick tentacles brushed her shoulders. There was no ill will but it was still overwhelming, and Lanoree retreated as far as she could from the crowd.

Finally, when she could turn and see the now-hollowed arch over rising above those gathered, Lanoree took out the holocron and stroked it to life.

"It's done," she told the image of the Kwa Master, ten thousand years dead. "Everything I was trying to do, I did. It cost so much... I wish it hadn't. But it's done."

"Great sacrifice is often necessary to fulfill the will of the Force," A'nang's holo-image said.

"I don't know what to do now. They say I'm on the galaxy's farthest edge, by what's left of the Gree empire. Not even the Rakata come out here, so I guess the gate is safe from them. The gate, and that place on the other side."

"That is a good thing."

"Did you know? About that world, the gates, that giant Tho Yor and the family inside it? Did you know who created the Je'daii and why?"

"I am not the dead Master," the holocron reminded. "I cannot say what he knew or did not know. I only contain the knowledge A'nang placed in me."

"But did *you* know any of it?"

"Only what would take you from Tython to the stars. The galaxy beyond has always been a mystery to me. Now I have learned some of it, through you. Thank you, Lanoree Brock."

Gratitude from a machine; after everything else it didn't feel strange. "I still need guidance," she admitted. "But you probably wouldn't know how to help me."

"Ask. Please."

"I doubt I'll ever be able to see Tython again, or any of the other Je'daii. I think I'll be stuck here, among aliens, for the rest of my life..."

"That is likely."

She pondered what kind of life that could be. Even if she never returned to Tython she might explore dozens of other worlds and systems, as Dal had wished to do. Exploration in itself could be lonely, a drifting through cold void. She needed a purpose.

Lanoree lifted her eyes to the gate. "How long do you think this gate can endure?"

"I do not know. Every machine breaks down. Every door closes and every archway falls to dust. One day even my circuits will fuse and I will cease to function."

"Do you think, one day, somebody will pass through that gate and unlock that world's full power? That's what the father said. They'd make it a wellspring of the Force."

"I cannot say. I only know what you Je'daii have told me."

"I know," she sighed and watched the mass of Gree and Kwa. "I'll have to make sure to tell them too."

"I know something of the preservation of knowledge," A'ngang's holocron said. "I'll help you in any way I can."

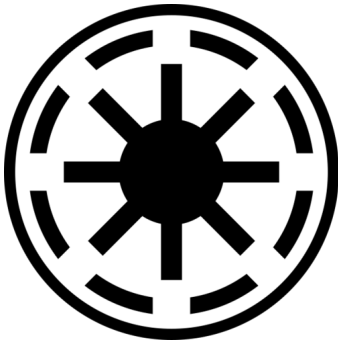
"Thank you," Lanoree whispered, and released the device. The light faded to nothing and she turned her eyes to the canyon walls, the alien sky.

The father had told her that maintaining balance was a Je'daii's mission, and that mission never ended. Balance within meant balance without, and the Force would not be balanced until those who used it found peace in their hearts. Even here that principle would stand, no matter what strange creatures she lived with and what planets she travelled to. The Force was universal, the Force endured, and the Force would always need someone to protect it.

In a vast strange galaxy, that much was certain. That was purpose, that was strength. With it, Lanoree thought, the Je'daii could endure until the end of time.

As long as they kept balance, within and without.

## PART IV



EVERYTHING OR NOTHING



## Chapter Thirty-One

Marasiah Fel stood in front of the refresher unit's bathroom mirror and stared at her reflection in the smeared glass. She'd washed it clean and pushed handfuls of thick brown hair from her face, but long strands of white fell off her forehead and dangled in front of her right eye. The white in her hair was dyed, as it has been for her father. He'd done it to honor his father and grandfather, both of whom had come about their shock-streaks and scars in battle.

It was the mark of the Fel monarchs, meant to show both honor and responsibility. She could still remember when she'd received hers. Her seventeenth birthday, the same age her father had been when he'd assumed the throne. They'd been in exile in Chiss space but Roan had wanted her to take up the mark as a sign of adulthood. The ceremony had been intimate. Her mother was already dead but her grandmother and namesake had still been alive. Her father had been there, of course, and Master Sinde too. And her uncle Hogrum.

She remembered feeling the weight of responsibility, and the ache that her mother wasn't alive to see that moment. Most of all, though, she'd been proud. Proud to take up the weight, and the honor, and to finally start fulfilling her destiny.

Marasiah shifted her head slightly and watched that white destiny sway in front of her eyes, back and forth, hypnotically.

A knocked sounded, jerking her back to reality.

“Come in,” Marasiah said.

Still watching the mirror, she saw the door behind her open. A woman appeared as a silhouette inside the portal, and Ania Solo said, “What do you know? They fit you better than I thought.”

She was referring to the clothes, Ania’s clothes, which she’d had to borrow after escaping her prison in bloodied pajamas. Marasiah looked down at the white blouse and black skirt; the suit-jacket dangled from a hook beside the door. It was the clothing of a businesswoman, not an empress, but it was the only formalwear Ania owned and it would do. Marasiah was taller than her cousin but, as she’d said, they fit surprisingly well.

“Yes,” Marasiah said, still looking at the mirror. “These will be... sufficient.”

“Thanks. They’re the nicest thing I own. I only wore ‘em a couple times. Had to do some business in a really fancy Core bank. They got really uncomfortable, especially during the robbery part.”

Marasiah turned around. “You robbed a bank?”

“No. Just kidding.” Ania smiled softly. “I thought about it though.”

She stared at her cousin and tried to get a touch of Ania in the Force. By all rights Ania should hate her; for Marasiah’s sake she’d lost her mother, perhaps forever. She could tell Ania’s thoughts dwelled heavily on Marin, though it was not with anger or recrimination but rather pure determination. She was going to go back for her.

“We’re going to be coming out of hyperspace in a minute,” Ania said. “Could get a little shaky. I wanted to warn you, make sure you didn’t smack your head on a mirror or something.”

Marasiah stepped away from the glass. “I’m fine, thank you. I didn’t realize we’d get to Bey’s fleet so soon.”

“We haven’t. We’re making another stop first.” Ania stepped back and waggled a beckoning finger. “Come on. Don’t worry, it won’t take long.”

Marasiah tugged on Ania’s clothes- they were still a little tight- then followed her cousin out of the cabin and down the hall. When they were in the corridor *Free Agent* decanted



from hyperspace with a shudder than nearly knocked Marasiah off-balance. The medical kit had mostly mended her feet but pressure in the wrong place still ached her soles, and if she twisted her torso too much she still felt pain in her lower back.

She followed Ania to an airlock portal, where a small crowd had gathered. It appeared they were offloading the four Mandalorians, which gave Marasiah small relief. She didn't want mercenaries knowing the location of Bey's hidden fleet.

When the portal opened a few more Mandalorians came through, but only long enough to exchange black-slapping hugs and help move their comrades' gear onto the other ship. Only a few glanced in Marasiah's direction, and those that did seemed unsurprised and unimpressed to see an empress watching them. After most of them had cleared out one newcomer remained. The tall man with a thick beard mixing gray and black leaned close to Ania and exchanged serious words with her. That lasted only a few minutes; then the man turned and left, and Ania sealed the airlock behind him.

After they heard the scrape of the other ship detaching from their hull, Ania turned to her cousin with a tight smile. "See? All done. Told you it wouldn't take long."

"Are those Mandalorians your... family?"

"A couple. Kind of," Ania said ambiguously, like she wasn't sure herself. "They're gonna take their ship back to Coruscant and start scouting the place. See what leads they can find."

"That won't be easy," Marasiah said. "There's no telling where my uncle will put a high-priority prisoner like your mother."

"I know, but is she really high-priority? Did those stormtroopers get a look of her using the Force or a lightsaber?"

Marasiah hadn't even thought of that. "No. I don't believe they did."

"Then she's got an advantage already. You've got to have some idea where your uncle might stash medium-grade prisoners, right?"

"I may."

“Good. We’ve got a little way yet until we reach the fleet. You can talk us through them. Your Knights have been giving us some ideas already.”

Ania waved her toward the rear hold, where she could faintly hear conversing voices. *Free Agent* lurched around them as it jumped to hyperspace and resumed their smooth ride.

Marasiah followed her cousin to the hold. She wasn’t sure how much good her advice would be, but advice was the least she could give.

When Saaraï escaped from the black she moved straight into the white. Glare of the overhead lights reverberated off pale walls and she couldn’t remember where she was. A few figures appeared from the edges of her vision and stared down at her. Shadow blanked their faces but she made out surgical masks, and then she remembered what had happened to her during *Mon Elusia*’s desperate flight from Coruscant. The memory of pain was enough to make her retch in the medical bed but one doctor soothed her, telling her she was going to be alright.

Doctors always said that. When they withdrew, apparently satisfied with the inspection, she rolled her head and looked to her right arm. It wasn’t there; the stump of her upper arm ended just past the shoulder. She blinked her eyes to focus and stared at it like the rest of her arm might come back.

She only stopped looking at it when Porat came. His voice was quiet but soothing as he touched her face. “I’m so sorry, Saaraï. They had to amputate the arm. The shrapnel tore up muscle and shattered bone, and you lost so much blood. When they took you off the bridge, I was afraid you wouldn’t make it.”

“Are we still on... *Mon Elusia*?” Her mouth was very dry and her voice cracked.

“That’s right. We’re inbound toward Bey’s fleet. It shouldn’t be long now.” He looked around the medical ward. “There’s a lot of wounded here. Many killed. Once we transfer you to *Alliance* they should have facilities to fix you with a prosthetic arm.”

She tried to remember the battle over Coruscant. They'd been forced to retreat without seeing their appointed mission through to the end.

"The empress... did they get her?"

"Apparently they did." Porat's smile was tired. "She'll meet us on *Alliance*."

"That's good."

"It is." His smile wilted. "But things are more complicated now. That attack on Coruscant..."

"Wasn't us," Saarai said as firmly as she could.

"I know. But the whole galaxy thinks it is. Even Brighton and the other alliance senators are starting to condemn us." He shook his head. "I just don't understand. Another group of partisans must have seen what we were doing, misinterpreted our intentions, and then—"

"No." She clasped his hand tight. "That was *Chalk*."

Porat blinked. "How can you know that?"

"I know. He turned his enemies against each other. Scared people into submission." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's what a smart Sith would have done."

"But... a false-flag attack on that scale, with so many ships..."

"Maybe... it was a real bunch of Alliance partisans, and Chalk strung them along and tricked them into attacking the trial. But he was behind it. I'm sure of it." She swallowed. "We gave him exactly what he wanted. Admiral Bey... you.... We're all villains now."

Porat was staggered. It pained her to see. Her husband was a patriot and an idealist. All these Alliance die-hards were. In the best of times their virtue was their strength. In others it was their great weakness, and Hogram Chalk had exploited it perfectly. She'd been Sith, and she understood that better than her husband ever could. In her failure to anticipate this she'd failed him, failed them all.

"I... will have to explain this to Bey and the empress," Porat said.

"They'll want proof," she said. "You'll probably never get it. But I *know*. It was Chalk."

He nodded dumbly; her husband didn't doubt her. "We'll have to find some other way to play it. Some way to

convince people of the truth. We have the empress now. We'll make a broadcast, a statement."

That had been their plan from the start. It would be much more complicated now, but it was still the only one they had. She squeezed his hand again and said, "Take your time. Think it over. I'm not going anywhere."

When Marin woke up she was in a chair, wrists and ankles bound by metal clasps to the frame. The room was a bland duracrete block with one door and the black bug-eye of a holocam in one corner. Standard interrogation room, then. She hoped the rest of the process would be standard too.

Keeping very still, so as not to alert them she was awake, Marin reached out with the Force. The fact that she *could* reach out with the Force made her heart swell. It meant they were treating her like a normal prisoner, not a Force-user, and that gave her a tactical advantage. She felt minds scattered elsewhere in what was probably some massive secure facility in the government district. They were the minds of functionaries: dutiful, precise, slightly bored.

Marin extended her awareness further, probing for the familiar Force-essences of her daughter or Marasiah. She felt none, not in this building or anywhere nearby, which was as good a sign as any of that they'd escaped. She thought she felt, vague and distant, the remembered mind of Hogrum Chalk, but she wasn't sure. She only knew that he wasn't nearby, another sign that her captors had no idea who she was.

She thought on how to play it, and when she was reasonably confident she'd found a course of action, Marin got the inevitable over with. She stretched her limbs as best she could, cranked her neck and shoulders, and alerted her watchers that she was awake.

She had no chronometer, but they seemed to make her wait longer than she'd expected. When her interrogator finally showed, she was mildly surprised to find it was a Kubaz instead of a typically-Imperial human.

"Good evening," the interrogator's voice buzzed through the long snout of his mask. "Let's begin by getting your name, shall we?"

Marin had already decided to play the surly Mandalorian. It came easily. "You first," she said.

"I'm sorry, but that is not how this interrogation works, and you know it. Let's not start on the wrong foot, shall we?"

The interrogator was being polite, but she was sure that would change. As she pretended to stew in anger she reached out with the Force for a sense of him. She was surprised to find his demeanor dutiful rather than intent, almost as though he was bored by what should have been a major interrogation.

"Call me Parja," she said. A good, typical Mando woman's name.

"Parja what?"

She pulled a clan name at random. "Ghitsoc. You'd better watch out. My *vode* won't let me just rot in your prison."

"A Mandalorian. Curious." She felt his interest raised. "I presume you know who you broke out of that prison?"

"She looked a little like the empress to me. But I guess she can't be, since she's dead, right?"

The Kubaz ignored her jibe. "I'd like you to tell me the client who hired you to break into that prison. I want names of everyone involved."

"We're mercenaries. Clients don't spill us their secrets."

"This is true. However, Mandalorians are not fools, and you wouldn't take on a mission like this lightly." He leaned forward. "Besides, for a human you seem to be of... mmm... advanced age. Mandalorian social structure is also known to prize experience. We can assume, therefore, that you held a senior position in your mercenary band."

"*Hold*. Not past tense."

"Think that way if you like."

"And my age isn't *advanced*. I fought my way in and out of that prison."

"Indeed. In most mercenary groups the senior members would have taken a back-seat role, guiding the mission from afar. Mandalorians are more hands-on than most, but still, I find this curious."

This was the tricky part. Just knowing Marasiah was alive made Marin a threat her captors would eventually eliminate. She had to convince them she was valuable and string them along until help arrived, and she was sure it was coming.

Ania wouldn't abandon her like this; she had faith in her daughter.

"This wasn't an ordinary mission," she said. "Our clients paid good money to get the empress out. And I don't have to tell you the risk. I went along to make sure absolutely nothing went wrong."

"Well, that's rather ironic. If what you're saying is true- and of course we have means of verification- I'm sure you have some idea who hired you." He leaned closer. "Names. Specifically."

"They didn't give me names," she said, "But I can describe them."

"Please do."

"There were two of them. A man and a woman. Human. Young. He was tall, with long red hair. Spoke with one of those crisp Imperial accents. The woman... you could tell she used to be pretty but her face was all scarred up, and she had a respirator to help her breathe." She'd already decided to give Ganner and Azlyn up; if they were safe and away they wouldn't mind.

She felt a spark of recognition inside the Kubaz. He knew exactly who they were. "How did they contact you?"

"They came to Mandalore looking for help. They said they had a big job, one that might make us big enemies if we messed up. My clan had the *gettse* to take them on. Maybe we shouldn't have."

"We're civilized beings here on Coruscant. We don't waste energy on petty revenge quests here."

That hit close to home. Marin allowed herself to sound rankled. "That must be nice."

"We're more concerned about your clients than your mercenary band. I want you to explain to me precisely how you knew to find the empress in that location."

Marin had expected this question and thought up the response most likely to keep her alive. "We were provided with a schematic of the building and told where to find her. Getting in and out was on us to figure out."

"So your clients knew the location of the prisoner *before* they hired you?"

"They gave us the intel after we arrived on Coruscant."

She could feel the Kubaz's brain working. By implying Ganner and Azlyn had had help she was putting Treis Sinde in danger, but the man could take care of himself. Chalk's people would start scouring for security leaks, which would take time. She subtly nudged him with the Force, suggesting that he'd have to be thorough in his search.

Because of that bug-eye holocam, she couldn't use strong Force suggestion. If the Kubaz started parroting her words verbatim, those watching might realize something was wrong and suspect she had the Force. This soft suggestion worked better.

The Kubaz said, "I'd like you to tell me what data, exactly, your clients showed you."

"You'll have to bring me some samples to jog my memory."

"That may yet be arranged." The Kubaz stood up. "You've been quite helpful so far, Miss Ghitsoc. I am pleasantly surprised."

"I was hired to do a job, not get tortured. I have no loyalty to anybody unless they pay me credits up front."

She nudged the Kubaz again, hoping he'd believe her. Whether he did or not, he'd know that she could never be set freed with the knowledge she had. And he knew she knew it too. She was trying to stay alive a little longer. The Kubaz knew that, and he seemed to accept it.

"Good evening, Miss Ghitsoc," he said. "We'll speak again."

The Kubaz stepped out of the room, which locked tight behind her. Marin felt his presence recede slowly down the hall outside.

She was alive for a little longer and her captors were unaware of her powers. That was as good a victory as she was going to get right now, but as silence grew louder in her empty cell she became crowded by doubts. She'd handled his questions well enough, but she began to consider what he hadn't asked.

He hadn't asked about any Alliance contacts. Hadn't even hinted at them, actually, which was unusual given the fire-show that had coincided with the rescue effort. More strangely, he hadn't asked about Marasiah's retrieval team

and where they might be now. It would have been easy to query about her team's exit strategy, but he hadn't even bothered. He'd only seemed concerned about tracing potential traitors within the government.

That worried her. It said Chalk's people were already more in control than they should have been. Even when he'd queried about her clients he hadn't pressed hard. The curiosity had been there, and it had felt earnest, but the whole interrogation had been so businesslike, as though what she said or didn't say mattered little.

And that, Marin decided, was true cause for fear; for herself, for Ania and Marasiah, for everyone. She jangled wrists and ankles, testing the metal binds that clamped her to the chair. If she had to, she thought, she could pop them with the Force. If she got her hands on weapons and used the element of surprise she might even be able to fight her way out of here.

The Force could save her yet, but she wasn't sure if it could save them all.

When *Free Agent* fell out of hyperspace it dropped toward a formation of warships clustered in deep space. Soon the small freighter was surrounded on all sides by Mon Calamari warships and sabertoothed frigates. At the center of the formation was their destination: a great white wedge of a star destroyer, with the Galactic Alliance crest proudly stamped in scarlet on either flank.

It was, Treis Sinde thought, as sign of how strange things had become that the embrace of his one-time enemies should fill him with relief. He'd never held any animosity toward the Alliance; on the contrary, he'd encouraged Roan to strike peace with them and unsuccessfully worked behind-the-scenes to make a pact with them and the Jedi. But in the end he was Imperial: born on Bastion, friend of the late Emperor, and last of the first generation of Imperial Knights.

As Admiral Bey's *Alliance* loomed larger in the cockpit viewport, Treis looked back to see the foundation of his self. Marasiah, dressed in a borrow blouse and jacket, looked more like a businesswoman than the empress she was. It wasn't just the clothes; some rectitude had gone out of her



posture, and strength from her eyes. She hadn't told Treis much about her imprisonment, but he sensed it had been more damaging than just solitary confinement.

As *Free Agent* drew closer, a flight of Crossfires whipped past them, the circled onto their flanks for escort. A woman's voice buzzed over the comm, saying, "Glad to see you made it in one piece. We went on ahead to clear the way for you."

Ania, seated in the co-pilot's spot, said, "Thanks, Anj. Show us the way and we'll set down."

"Head for the forward hangar. They've set up a welcoming party."

With AG-37 at the helm, *Free Agent* dipped smoothly beneath the destroyer's bow, then pulled up into the auxiliary hangar. Treis wasn't sure what he'd expected, but he was surprised to see how empty the bay was. Less two dozen Alliance troops were packed together on a deck empty of other vessels. He supposed they were planning to keep Marasiah's presence under-wraps, even now.

It was a far cry from the jubilant welcome he'd secretly hoped for, but he had a feeling Marasiah wasn't in the mood for a victory parade. After *Free Agent* set down and began cooling engines, everyone started for the exit. Once the landing ramp was fully lowered, there was a moment's hesitation as to who should go first; despite this being an Alliance ship, none of them were Alliance.

Ganner and Azlyn decided to take the lead. They're dressed up for this, red armor and lightsabers clipped to their belts, and they looked as regally Imperial as could be.

As they started down the ramp, Marasiah whispered to Treis, "Master Sinde. With me, please."

"Of course, Empress." *Free Agent's* main corridor had just enough room for them to stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

She took a breath and, to his surprise, put a hand on his bicep and squeezed.

"Are you all right, Empress?"

"I'm fine." She stared down at the lowered ramp and open portal as if afraid of it.

"They're waiting for you."

"I know."

“Not just the ship. The whole galaxy is, even if they don’t know it yet.”

He said it as encouragement, but the tight frown on her face grew deeper. She released his arm, lifted her head high like a royal, and started down the ramp. Treis followed, right beside her.

The welcome party was modest but sufficiently formal. Treis was pleased when all two dozen soldiers in blue Alliance uniforms snapped salute. The tall broad Weequay in admiral’s bars could only have been Jhoram Bey, and he stepped forward with an eager grin.

“Empress, it is an honor to see you alive,” he said. Not saluting or bowing, Treis noticed, but the smile seemed genuine.

“Thank you for giving me shelter,” Marasiah said. “I won’t forgive the risks you took to help free me. Or the losses you took.”

“Indeed.” Bey’s smile was replaced by a deep-lined frown. “*Mon Elusia* is limping its way through hyperspace and should arrive within the hour. We still don’t have a proper casualty count.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“I want to say they understood the risks... but no one anticipated what happened at Coruscant. Those fighters that launched the attack on Stazi’s trial were *not* my people.”

“So Master Rae assured me.” She tipped her head toward Azlyn. “I’m hoping you have ideas on who was responsible.”

“A few. Once Senator Derrol gets here from *Mon Elusia* I’m going to hold a conference where we can all discuss our next move. We have quarters set up for you as well, Empress, and medical facilities available to any of your people. I understand your escape was not an easy one.”

“My people are fine, thank you,” she said, though Treis noticed she’d been stepping awkwardly for the still-healing wounds to her feet. There was no telling what other kind of damage she’d taken until they gave her a proper check-up.

“Perhaps,” Treis said, “You should receive a full physical. Just to be sure, Empress.”

Mild annoyance twitched on her face. “I’d rather get down to business. Admiral Bey, please show me to the conference

room and so we may begin as soon as Senator Derrol arrives.”

“Very well.” Bey shifted gaze to the three figured huddled beneath *Free Agent*’s nose. Ania, Sauk, and AG-37 were visibly apart from all the Imperial and Alliance formality. “I believe this ship belongs to Ania Solo, correct? We’re all in your debt.”

“It actually belongs to him.” Ania tapped AG-37’s metal torso. “People keep getting that mixed up.”

“Still,” said Bey, “Thank you. We’ll give your ship any repairs it needs and we’ve set aside cabins for your people.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Ania shook her head. “Well, we might need a quick patch-up, but we don’t need the rooms. We’re getting out of here as soon as we can.”

Treis explained, “We had to abandon a member of their crew on Coruscant. We believe she’s been captured by the enemy.”

Bey’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry. That’s... concerning.”

“She doesn’t know where this fleet is,” Ania waved a hand. “She can’t compromise you in any way. But we’re going back for her.”

“I understand. I respect your taking care of your people. Please wipe the location of the fleet from your navigation data after you leave.”

“Sure, no problem.”

To Treis’ surprise, Marasiah announced, “Master Rae, you will be accompanying them on the return to Coruscant.”

Azlyn blinked. “I am? Highness?”

“Yes. Be their guide to the capital. Give them any help they need. Use all your contacts, including with the Jedi.”

Treis understood they were talking about Shado Vao. Azlyn shot a reluctant look at Ganner, then nodded. “As you command, Majesty.”

“I do,” Marasiah said, quiet but firm.

Stiffly, a little awkwardly, Azlyn stepped away and joined Ania’s group beneath *Free Agent*’s nose. Treis cleared his throat and asked, “May I have a moment, Majesty?”

Marasiah gave him a regal nod. She was finding her inner royal again. Treis followed Azlyn back to the ship and gestured for Ania to separate herself from the others.

"I'll be short," Treis said. "The woman you're going back to rescue is your mother. Correct?"

"That's right."

"And your mother was once a Fel."

Ania nodded. "She said you knew each other."

"Not well, but yes. A long time ago. Before there was such a thing as Imperial Knights, we were apprentice Jedi together."

And training along with them in the Jedi academy on Bastion: Mohrgan Valtor. Roan and Vitor Fel. Even Kol and Nat Skywalker had dropped by from time to time. All of them were gone now. That was why it had seemed imperative to say just a few words to Marin's daughter; she was the last one left.

Ania asked, "Is there anything you want me to tell her?"

Treis hadn't considered that. No answer came to mind. "Just do your best to rescue her. I'm sure the Force will be with you."

It wasn't the sort of thing a man said often nowadays, but here he believed it was true. "Thank you," Ania nodded.

Treis felt a small relief to have that said. He stepped back to Marasiah and Ganner and Admiral Bey, who watched them in expectant silence.

"I believe," Marasiah said, "we are ready to get started."

Bey gestured for the exit on the far wall. "Then if you'll follow me, Empress, we have a lot to talk about."

The soldiers fell out first, and then Bey. Marasiah followed, then Treis and Ganner. Before they exited the hangar he turned one last look on *Free Agent* and saw they were already boarding the ship. They, too, had urgent work to do.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

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Things felt different on this side of the gate. Jariah couldn't describe it- he didn't have words for *any* of this- but there was a difference. It was almost like he was seeing everything through dirtied glass and hearing through plugged-up ears. Things seemed less vivid here, less real, though as he looked around at the faces gathered in the cavern with him, they were all so familiar. Cade was hunched on a stool, brow furrowed in thought as Deliah hung off one shoulder. Khat Lah sat beside E'Lorem, and Kyra stood next to Jao. Darth Talon and Eli Horn stood against the wall, together but apart. Even R2-D2 and C-3PO were here. Lowbacca's absence was gaping, but something else was missing too.

The Force, that strange unwanted gift, was still with Jariah, but it was a lot weaker here than on the other side of the gate. Sometimes he could even pretend he'd never been touched with the Force at all. He should have been glad of that, but he wasn't. The world seemed suddenly deprived of depth.

"The first thing we should do is contact Ania," Kyra said. Jariah heard with clear ears, yet felt like he was straining. "We need to find out what's happening on her end. And tell her what's up with ours."

"Agreed," said Jao, then added, "We should also try and contact the Jedi. They deserve to know what happened to Master Lowbacca."

"What do we tell them?" Jariah asked.

Nobody had an easy answer to that. Cade, who might have understood things best, was staring off into nothing, lost in

thoughts. It wasn't like after Tython, when the Tho Yor thing had seriously messed up his mind. Cade was seeing clearly now, and whatever he saw had him thinking hard.

Jao said, "There's only one way in the galaxy for the Jedi and Imperial Knights to get the Force back. It's right here."

"The only way we know of," Talon said. "The Tho Yor on Tython showed you one way. There may yet be others."

"One's plenty." Jariah tapped his chest. "That gate don't just give Jedi back their powers. It gives it to *anybody*. Even murglacks like me who don't want it. Have you thought about the implications of that yet?"

A few eyes darted to Cade, who looked like he was thinking on them hard, but he volunteered nothing. Eli said, "If you start bringing Jedi and Imperial Knights here and sending them through the gate, word's going to get out. More people will come. You'll be swamped with visitors, more than you can control." He looked at E'Lorem. "They'll all want the same thing. Most of them shouldn't get it."

Jariah wasn't normally prone to agree with Sith apprentices, but he said, "The kid's got a point. This ain't some magic potion that gives you midi-chlorians back. This is something else entirely."

Khat Lah exhaled. "I agree this is a very difficult problem. The Keepers of the Whills have guarded the hypergate for millennia. Naturally, they should be the ones to decide its access."

"The Keepers have already begun to conference," E'Lorem rasped, "This is a very difficult decision. We have had visitors throughout the centuries, of course, but they have always been rare, and we have sworn them to secrecy."

"And," Kyra said, "that hypergate hasn't actually *worked* for, what, ten thousand years?"

"Fourteen." The Kwa bobbed his long neck. "But we also understand the need is greater than ever before."

Eli stirred, like he wanted to say something. A few people watched him, expectant, but the young man kept his jaw shut.

"I think the Jedi Council, at least, deserves to know what we've found," Jao said. "As for the Imperial Knights... From what it sounds like, I don't think we should contact them until the political situation changes."

"We're not gonna tell the Jedi what's what unless we get the okay from the Keepers." Jariah tilted a head toward E'Lorem. "Right?"

"Of course," said Khat Lah.

"But we should still check with Ania," Jao said. "Maybe she can even get a message to the Jedi about Lowbacca."

It was a modest plan, but small nods went around the room, agreeing it was a place to start.

Deliah took a hand of Cade's shoulder. "I guess I should start giving *Mynock* some preflight checks. Jariah, Cade, you wanna come with me? Something familiar should clear both your minds up."

"Sounds good to me." Jariah stood up and started for the door slowly, eyes on Cade.

His friend stared into the wall for a little while longer before finally rising. "Sure," he said distantly, "Sounds fun."

From the cavern's corner, R2-D2 tweeted and C-3PO raised metal arms. "Oh, excuse me, Master Cade, but there's something we think you'd like to hear."

Cade sighed. "Sure. What's it about, Threepio?"

"Well, Master Cade, it has to do with the Journal of the Whills, which you tasked me to review and translate while you were had passed through the hypergate."

Cade blinked; it was clear he'd forgotten all about that. "Find anything interesting?"

"Oh, many interesting things. The Journal, you see, is essentially a massive oral history of galactic history, as relayed by those who have visited Rohakkalla over the millennia. As the last visitor to this place came nearly two centuries ago, Artoo and I have a lot to fill in, but naturally we were up to the task. In fact--"

Cade held up a hand. "I know all that. Just get the point. Please."

"Of course, Master Cade. Most notably, references to a Chosen One, or a similar prophecy, appeared in one hundred and thirteen separate entries in the portions of the Journal we've reviewed, which thus far stands at sixty-two percent."

"Fascinating. What else?"

"Most interestingly, the first appearance also seemed to be the most relevant to your situation, as I understand it."

Cade picked his head up. He hadn't told them much about what had happened to him in the eruption, but he'd said that his awareness had been stretched beyond this plane to connect with the Cosmic Force and the ascended Whills who, as a collective awareness, directed its flow and, in limited ways, affected the lives of mortal beings in the Living Force. None of which made any sense to Jariah, but 3PO might have a better perspective.

"Can you read me what it says?" Cade asks, "Verbatim?"

"Verbatim? Well, of course, Master Cade. I've saved it in my memory circuits." C-3PO made a throat-clearing noise, followed by chattering and hisses in the ancient Kwa language.

Jariah rolled his eyes. "The *translation*, Threepio."

"Then why did you request a verbatim recital?" C-3PO shook his head. "Ah, well. The translation, according to my language matrix, reads as follows: 'When darkness inflicted on the Force is too strong, the Force may create a being who can bring balance. This being will be mortal, but ethereal. Light, but dark. Limited, but infinite. They will fill the wound and become a bridge across the heavens.'" C-3PO tilted his head. "The reference to a 'heavens' is somewhat subjective, as the Kwa term used in the original text denotes a location not just beyond standard physical but temporal as well. 'A bridge across forever' would have been another suitable translation, though nothing in Basic gives full approximation. Given your description of the events beyond the gate, I believe I am closer to understanding."

"What do you understand?"

"Well, Master Cade, the passage seems to imply that you, and every Skywalker before you, was a potential bridge connecting the layers of the Force as you describe. Of course, these prophecies are always vague, and the origin of these earliest journal entries is quite specious. Nonetheless, I found it interesting that the Chosen One references could go back so far and still maintain the relevance they do. Don't you think that's interesting, Master Cade?"

"Very. Thanks, Threepio." He glanced at Jariah and Deliah. "Come on, let's start running checks on *Mynock*. Give me something straightforward to think about."



"Sounds good to me, *pateesa*," Jariah said. As they stared for the cavern exit he glanced at Jao and Kyra. "Wanna help?"

"Gladly," Jao said, and together the five of them started through the tunnels and back to the ship, where things could at last be simple.

It went without say that Sith were not invited to leave Rohakalla. Eli wasn't expecting the offer and wouldn't have taken it anyway. Talon wasn't expecting it either, but Eli could tell she was frustrated with desire.

They walked back to the cavern where they'd been kept under guard. It seemed like forever since Eli had been there. According to Talon he and his companions had been gone for less than a standard week. He guessed the time passed on that other world had been closer to a month. Everything he'd been through made it feel even longer.

As they walked up the cliffside path to the cave she asked him, "What will you do now, Eli?"

He was surprised to be called by his first name. Normally she only called him *apprentice*. Even without the Force she must have sensed the change in him.

"I have no idea," he lied.

"You can go anywhere. Do anything." Her voice creaked with envy. "It would be shameful to waste the power you've been given."

Strange to hear her say words so close to Kyra's. "I don't intend to waste them. I know exactly how rare these gifts are and I'll find something worth doing with them." That much, at least, was true. As they stopped on the cliff ledge and looked down at the inert gate, only loosely guarded by a handful of Yuuzhan Vong, he asked, "What do *you* plan to do?"

Talon stared at the gate with longing. It was clear what she wanted and equally clear she'd never get it. She bled despair into the Force, and he wondered why she hadn't forced *Mynock* to destroy her during her escape attempt. Maybe Talon herself didn't know.

"I will remain here for a time," Talon whispered. "There are things I must contemplate."

Without saying more she turned and walked back down the slope. He watched as she stepped onto the canyon floor, sat down, and stared into the empty gate as if begging for it to yield its power. He'd never thought he'd see her so broken.

Collecting himself, Eli stepped into the cavern. The Yuuzhan Vong guards seemed to have given up trying to monitor them. The place was empty except for the pack Eli had brought back through the gate. He sat on a stone ledge, fished through the back, and drew out the black, smooth-sided holocron.

He hadn't told Talon about this and didn't want her to see it. He touched the thing gently with the Force and watched as Darth Traya's image resolved before him.

"So you come to me again." She sounded faintly pleased. "Have you conquered your apathy and found the strength to act?"

"I think I have." Strange he could speak to this digital ghost of a long-dead Sith like he could to no one else. She alone seemed to understand. "I'd like to know... what would you *do* in a galaxy without the Force?"

Traya's image was still, and Eli wondered if this was a question the holocron had never been programmed to answer. But she said, "If I were free of the Force, it would be a moment of self-discovery like none other. Perhaps it would destroy me, for knowledge is deadlier than any blade unless you have the will and strength to wield it. No matter what, I would face it proudly, with the thrill of being more free and alive than I ever have before."

"But what about the *galaxy*? I can't be free of the Force, but I can still use it and do what I have to do."

"You speak as though you were the last being in existence who could touch the Force."

"I'm not... but I might as well be."

"It seems you are in a situation even I cannot understand," Traya said thoughtfully. "You are a fortunate young man. I would be excited to stand in your place now."

Eli realized he *was* excited. Anxious and terrified but also instilled with purpose. He couldn't remember ever feeling this certain.

"Maybe it is." He allowed a tiny smile. "But again: if you were the last person in the galaxy who could touch the Force, what would you do?"

Traya's holocron contemplated again. At last she said, "I would stand back. I would see this liberated galaxy and I would watch for whatever ruptures might emerge. The Force is as persistent as it is insidious, and even though you think it gone now, it may always return to ensnare beings in its empty promises. In all times of great change there comes violence, struggle, agony. They are the fires that forge us into stronger people. Once honed, I would use my powers to make the greatest good for the greatest number."

Again she'd put words to his swirling thoughts, settling them and giving him new direction. "Thank you," he said.

"It would be a heavy responsibility. I envy your current freedom, but not the burden to come."

Talon and Kyra whispered in his ear. "I can't waste the powers I have."

Traya raised her chin, though not enough to show the darkness beneath her hood. "You are a rare creature. It has been a pleasure to speak with you through the veil of years."

"Likewise," Eli said, "but I think I have to go now."

"Very well. If you seek any more guidance, summon me again."

Eli nodded and placed the holocron on the ledge. Without his touch, Traya's image shimmered and died. He took deep breaths, stared at the black pyramid, and wondered if he'd even use it again.

Then he heard the smack of boots on the stone behind him. Eli tensed and said, "I'm sorry, Master, I should have told you."

But when he turned to the cavern entrance there was no Twi'lek staring at him. It was only Kyra, and her expression showed not surprise but bitter disappointment.

"I knew," she told him. "Did you expect me to think it just fell out of my bag?"

Eli remained seated on the stone ledge, an arm's length from the holocron, seemingly frozen in shock. Very slowly he said, "I expected you to confront me about it before."

"Maybe I should have." Kyra remained in the cavern's archway entrance, one hand on the rough frame. "You didn't *seem* like you were going dark, though."

"I'm not. I've been in the dark already. It's a lonely place and I don't want to go back."

"Then why did you keep that?"

"Why did *you* keep it? Why did you even *have* it? Where did this come from? Does Skywalker or—"

She sighed. "I picked that up a long time ago. I didn't even know what it was at first. And then, when I lost the Force, it didn't really matter, so I just kept it."

"Without telling Skywalker or Jao. They still don't know."

"I didn't hide it from them because I was afraid." She realized it for a lie as she said it.

"You were curious and you wanted to hear what it had to say." Eli scooped the thing up and held it to his chest. "So did I. Neither of us did anything wrong."

"I want to believe that."

She wanted to say more: that she'd come to depend on him over there, trust him and empathize with him, and she wanted to believe they could keep moving down righteous paths, even if they were separate ones. The words caught in her throat. Seeing him possessively clutch that Sith holocron dispelled kind illusions. She wished she'd stepped in just a minute earlier and heard some of his conversation with Darth Traya's digital ghost. All she'd gotten were the parting words.

*I can't waste the powers I have*, he'd said.

And she: *You are a rare creature. It has been a pleasure to speak with you through the veil of years.*

It hinted at so much more. When the holocron had been stolen from her, Kyra had only begun to riddle out the purpose of Darth Traya. Eli seemed to have found it.

"What are you even doing here?" he snapped. "Aren't you supposed to be flying off to talk with your friend?"

"I will be. I came here first because I wanted to give you this." She reached into her back pocket and held out the long metal cylinder of Eli's lightsaber. She let it hang at her side, and though she didn't feel Eli tug for it in the Force she gripped it extra-tight.

He looked at it in disbelief. "You were going to give it back?"

"Well, they've confiscated Talon's, which used to be Jao's, but he doesn't want to use it until he gets the Force back, and Skywalker has his own. They said I could keep yours... but I thought you deserved it back. Now I'm not sure."

Eli's eyes locked on that saber. He wasn't sure either. Eventually he stood up and held out the holocron. "You want this back? Take it."

"I don't want it back. I want to get rid of it."

"So you haven't learned anything useful from it?"

He said it with a slight mocking smile. In truth, she *had* learned from it. If it weren't for Darth Traya, Kyra might not have been able to find the strength within what in turn summoned strength without. She might have even been killed back there.

"I learned some things," she admitted, "But I know better than to stupidly follow every bit of so-called wisdom I get from a Sith. I thought you'd learned that lesson too."

"She'd hardly a typical Sith."

"I know that. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to do whatever she says. I'm my own person. I make my own choices."

"I'm glad to hear it. I do too." He lowered his hand but the holocron stayed in the air before him, suspended by the Force. "Destroy it."

She blinked. "What?"

"I said you can destroy it. Then we'll both be rid of it. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Kyra froze. *She* was hesitating now, despite what she'd said.

"Kyra," he said softly, "What did you do with your ghosts?"

She blinked. The holocron still hovered between them. "What do you mean?"

"I told you what happened to mine on that planet. What happened to yours?"

"Nothing," she admitted. "They were still watching me when we went back through the gate. I left them behind." In her mind's eye she could see those twin silhouettes on the

horizon and knew they would never leave her. But she was okay with that; she'd gained more on the other side of the gate than she could have ever imagined.

Eli whispered, "I thought so," voice disappointed.

Suddenly the lightsaber flew from her grip. It slapped into Eli's palm and the red blade flared out. Kyra frantically tried to summon the Force, to raise a wall and push back against him before he could lunge at her.

Eli lashed out once, a horizontal strike. It cut the holocron in two and the pyramid fell to the cavern floor. Kyra stared at the device's smoking entrails and the sparks that quickly showered to nothing at their feet.

Eli shut off the lightsaber. When she looked up, he tossed it and she caught it with one hand.

"It's best for both of us that way," he told her.

She hoped, maybe even believed, it was true. "Your lightsaber?"

"Keep it," he said. "It's not mine anymore. You might want to change the color, though. Jao can tell you how to switch the crystal."

Kyra looked down at the weapon. Jao had told her most knights built their own lightsaber and invested it with part of themselves. Even if she carried this the rest of her life she doubted this would ever truly be hers.

She didn't thank him. She sensed his didn't want gratitude; from what faintly she could gleam of him in the Force, he seemed relieved. She still understood little. Eli felt resolved to act, but she couldn't imagine to what end. He seemed like he was giving up everything.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

Eli looked at the broken holocron. "It will take a while to explain. And I think you have a ride to catch."

In all this she'd forgotten her excitement to speak with Ania again. Clutching his lightsaber tight she said, "When I come back, you'll tell me."

"Yes."

"I want a promise."

He looked up and held her gaze. "I promise, Kyra. I'll explain it all."

She searched his dark eyes and the Force and found no more answers. "I'll hold you to that."

He simply nodded. Kyra hooked the lightsaber to her belt; it felt strange being there. She had such a long way to go before she'd feel worthy of it.

There was nothing else she could do here, not now. She gave Eli one nod back, then hurried from the cave.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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From the conference room aboard the *Alliance* one could see the vast spread of the star destroyer's hull, white decorated with gold. Beyond that, ships from the rogue fleet drifted against the stars, among them several massive Mon Calamari battle cruisers. It was a potent fighting force, but as they talked it seemed smaller and smaller to Marasiah.

"We've been keeping a steady eye on the news reports of the trial," *Alliance's* Captain Ona Antilles explained. "The prosecution has just completed presenting evidence. They've made a case that Stazi and the senators worked together with Black Sun and the Sith to set the empress up for execution. Once at Bavinyar, and again by bombing her apartment on Coruscant. Most of the evidence is forensic, though they also point to financial transactions with Black Sun-aligned banks."

"It's an absolute fabrication, based on lies and coincidence," Senator Derrol said. "I had nothing to do with any of that. I hadn't even spoken to Aynes since the end of the war."

The name of her husband's assassin sparked irritation in Marasiah. Before her uncle's coup, which seemed a lifetime ago, this senator was the one she'd had suspicions about. That she'd sent Ganner and Azlyn to investigate him had saved them and her too. Derrol's parking-garage encounter with Eshkar Niin and the recording on Niin's binoculars still needed explanation. The latter might have been forged, but the former had surely happened.



If she was going to put her trust in these people, and it looked like she had to, Marasiah needed to be sure.

Folding her hands on the conference table, she looked to Derrol. "Senator, I need to know. Have you ever had clandestine meetings with Admiral Stazi?"

The Chagrian stiffened, clearly resentful of the implication but wavering on how to respond. The others watched and waited until he admitted, "Yes. I was a soldier. He was my commander. There are certain bonds there. We did maintain some unofficial contact, but we never did *anything* to undermine the integrity of the Federation."

"And why did Darth Havok- or Eshkar Niin- confront you in the parking garage of the senatorial apartment?"

Derrol's eyes flicked to Ganner, who'd asked him these same questions just hours before the coup. "As I told your investigators before, it was a chance encounter. The Sith was trying to sneak into the building. I don't know where specifically. I confronted him and he ran."

The words didn't ring true to Marasiah and she fought the urge to call him out in front of Bey and Antilles. She couldn't afford to alienate these people and she could sense they trusted Derrol implicitly. This left her at an unhappy impasse.

As she struggled to respond, Ganner volunteered, "When Master Rae and I went to Vorzyd V to investigate Black Sun we found strong implications of Sith complicity but we didn't learn the specifics. We weren't able to bring back hard evidence either. We know Aynes was employed by a Black Sun front company and that's how they recruited him to act at Bavinyar."

"Exactly," Derrol said. "There's absolutely no reason I should have been involved with Bavinyar. All the pieces were there already."

Marasiah sensed that here, at least, he was telling the truth. It was his encounter with Niin that he was obfuscating about, and she had no idea why.

Treis Sinde said, "Chalk is trying hard to connect the attacks at Bavinyar and Coruscant together. Normally assassins prefer using similar personnel and similar tactics. The shooting and the bombing were different in every way."

“That’s an argument for a defense attorney,” Captain Antilles said. “And in any case, we *know* the bombing was staged. We have proof right here.” She gestured to Marasiah, then look to Bey. “Frankly, Admiral, I don’t see why we’re not making a full broadcast right now.”

“We would be, if the whole senate wasn’t decrying us as terrorists,” the Weequay said sourly. “We have to think carefully.”

“We need to act before the trial completes and the verdict is handed down,” Derrol said. “Chalk hasn’t taken anything off the table, not even execution.”

“I tried to counsel against it,” Marasiah said softly. “My uncle... came to me several times for advice.”

Just remembering made her think of their last conversation, the rage that had overtaken her, and the tang of the stun blast as it had dropped her mid-lunge.

“If we *do* make an announcement,” Bey said, “Some may claim the empress has allied with terrorists. They’ll start doubting her story. There will be fractures in both the Imperial and Alliance portions of the senate.” He spread his hands. “Frankly... none of us know what’s going to happen. It could easily lead to another civil war, which is exactly what I’ve been trying to avoid.”

Marasiah could sense how achingly Bey wished his mentor Stazi were here, but he wasn’t, and that was the whole problem. She asked, “What about Admiral Slossar? Where is the rest of the Alliance fleet?”

“Off in the Outer Rim, cleaning up after the Nagai and the Ssi-ruuk,” Bey said. “Chalk sent nearly all of the Alliance ships there to finish the job Stazi started. He put them far from Coruscant, and if Slossar had objected he’d have been painted as a traitor who was unwilling to fight the good fight against the invaders. It was a very simple, effective move.”

“My uncle is good at those,” Marasiah said dryly.

“Maybe better than any of us know,” said Derrol. “Has it occurred to anyone else that the attack on Coruscant may have been staged?”

“There were a lot of Crossfires in the sky,” said Marasiah. “Many of those were destroyed. Who were the pilots? I can’t believe even my uncle could pull a fraud on that scale. He’d

have to have found dozens of pilots willing to fly suicide missions.”

“We’ve analyzed some gun-camera footage from Rogue Squadron,” Bey said. “There weren’t many Crossfires in the sky by the time they got to the surface, but the markings on those other ships seem to place them as belonging to a unit that was based with Admiral Stazi’s fleet during the war, then reassigned to the Core.”

“So they *could* have acted on their own,” Ganner said. “When they saw *Mon Elusia* show up over Coruscant—”

Derrol shook his head. “It’s possible Chalk may have lured them into attacking earlier. *Mon Elusia* was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You mean the attack was always supposed to happen?” asked Treis.

“It’s possible.” Derrol shrugged. “But it makes sense, doesn’t it? We’re pariahs now. I’m sure the magistrates are more likely to rule against Stazi and the others. That attack gave Chalk everything he wanted, and fools we are, we helped him sell it.”

Marasiah could sense the senator’s conviction. He certainly believed his words. The Force wasn’t raising alarms about Derrol except when it came to his confrontation with Niin. Everything else about him seemed honest and she couldn’t make sense of it.

Glum silence went around the room. Captain Antilles finally said, “The facts are the facts. It’s not an ideal situation but we have to act somehow.”

“Very true,” Bey smiled wearily. “You’ll make a good admiral someday, Ona, but for now the empress and I make final decisions.”

“Of course,” Antilles nodded.

The Weequay looked to Marasiah. “What do you say, Majesty? Will we announce ourselves together and see what breaks?”

“I’d like to be a little more prepared before then.” She thought a moment. “You said Admiral Slossar is occupied, but he still has a major fighting force. That can make or break what we do next. You should try to find out his reaction to what’s happened.”

"Should we tell him *you* are alive?" asked Antilles.

"If you think he can be trusted with the knowledge."

"Slossar's a good soldier," Bey said. "He follows orders and obeys the rules but he also knows when to break them, like when he funneled his troops to Stazi after the war. He can also keep secrets. We can try and contact him. We'll send a runner a few jumps away, so they can't trace the call's location."

"That sounds good," Ganner nodded. "Rogue Squadron?"

Bey snorted. "Believe it or not, there *are* other snubfighter squads in this fleet. But the moment Anj hears of this, I'm sure she'll volunteer." Fondness was plain in his voice.

"Thank you, Admiral," Marasiah said. "If we can get assurances from Slossar, then we can act."

Everyone looked pleased to have some plan, despite all the uncertainty. In truth, Marasiah was less worried about Slossar and more about Derrol. Something about the senator still nagged, and she'd bought herself time to try and learn what.

After the meeting was over, she and her two Knights stepped into the corridor. To Ganner she said, "I want you to look into Derrol a little more. The Force is telling me he's not being truthful about Eshkar Niin. About Bavinyar, yes, but not his encounter with Niin."

Ganner looked perplexed but said, "I'll do what I can. Should I speak with him again?"

"Privately, please." She thought a moment. "Derrol's wife joined him here, correct?"

"I heard she was with him on *Mon Elusia* actually," Treis said. "Brave or foolish woman, following him into a combat zone. They say she lost her arm during the fight and is currently in *Alliance's* sick bay awaiting a new one."

"Then it should be easy to question her. Ganner, talk to her about that night before you speak with her husband."

"Yes, Empress."

"And speaking of sick bay," Treis said, "I *would* like to give you a medical checkup."

"I'm fine," she said. "My feet are healing. My other hurt was minor."

"Have you checked for bone fractures on your hands?"

She looked at her knuckles. The skin was still pink and fresh after applying bacta salve aboard *Free Agent*. She'd let Treis think she'd hurt them during the escape. Better that than tell him she'd pounded her fists to bleeding against the wall of her prison.

With a sigh, she decided to appease him. "All right. I will go down to sick bay and have an exam."

"You can try asking Derrol's wife a few questions yourself," Ganner suggested. "You'd see the truth better than any of us."

Marasiah wished that was true. "I'll have a few words with her," she said. "Let's ask Captain Antilles to show us the way."

*Alliance's* medical wing was as well-equipped as any warship Treis Sinde had ever been on, and he dully wondered how much of the medical machinery had been aboard when Stazi stole it from Krayt and how much came later. There were three full-body scanners, capsules full of blood and synthesized plasma for four dozen different species, ten bacta tanks, and an attached machinery shop that custom-built prosthetic limbs.

He, Ganner, and the empress arrived at the medical wing under guard. Apparently Bey and Antilles weren't ready for the whole fleet to know about Marasiah's existence yet, despite all they'd suffered to get her back. As the empress was reluctantly led away to be examined, Treis and Ganner gained permission to see the other parts of the ward.

A number of prisoners with serious injuries had been shuttled over from *Mon Elusia's* strained sick bay, but there was only one young, one-armed Chagrian woman among them. Ganner and Treis spotted her from the other side of the room; she lay in her bed looking quite miserable, and when her eyes met theirs across the room they held. Ganner and Treis turned away instead of coming closer. It felt impolite to interrogate a woman in a hospital bed, especially one currently being measured by a medical droid for a replacement arm.

Marasiah completed her body scan in less than half a standard hour. When Treis and Ganner rejoined her in the

ward's sealed section she had just put Ania Solo's undersized outfit back on.

"If you don't mind the suggestion," Treis said, "Can't you ask the medics for something better fitting?"

"These fit well enough." She tugged the hem of the blouse down. "Besides, the only clothes they have here in the hospital are... too familiar."

Treis glanced at a few hanging from a wall rack. Plain, lightweight, loose, white. He understood her point.

"Well," she looked between her Knights, "Perhaps *you* would like to be scanned, sampled, and prodded?"

Ganner blanched. "Majesty, you were the one being held captive for weeks. The two of us—"

"As I understand it, Master Krieg, *you* were in a near-fatal starship crash. I think that warrants at least a look over."

Treis could tell she was enjoying this and decided to let her have it. She'd had no other mirth lately. With a hand on Ganner's shoulder and said, "Master Krieg, I think we should submit to an examination. For our own good."

Ganner fought a frown but said, "I suppose we can."

As if on cue, the stout Drallian who'd taken Marasiah back to be examined returned to the room. "Doctor," she said, "If my exam is clear, I think you should attend to my Knights."

The doctor's whiskered face twitched. "I'm sorry, Empress, but the results of your physical examination found something unusual."

She paled. "Define unusual."

The Drallian removed a remote control from his lab coat and tapped a button. A holoprojector mounted on the wall flared to life and the half-size outline of a female form hovered among them. With another tap on the remote, a small portion of the outline lit white, along with the fainter glow of a human skeleton. The rectangular marker was located in Marasiah's lower back beneath the right ribcage.

She immediately put a hand over that spot. "What have you found?"

"Is that an... implant of some kind?" asked Ganner.

"The composition appears to be a mix of organic and synthetic elements," the Drallian said. "A cursory scan wouldn't have found it at all."

Marasiah pulled up the tail of her shirt and twisted in a vain attempt to see her own back. Treis and the doctor leaned close; the skin there had no visible blemishes but a patch looked slightly more pink than the rest.

“Yes, this makes sense.” The doctor prodded the spot with one small finger. “After the procedure to insert the implant, your captors would have salved it with bacta to close the wound. The spot would have still been visible for a few days, but given its location on your body, it’s understandable you missed it.”

Marasiah tugged the shirt down. “What *is* it? Can’t your high-level scans tell me that?”

“Our technicians are analyzing now,” the doctor said. “Tell me, do you remember being rendered unconscious for a prolonged period of time?”

Only once, she thought, when she’d given in to rage, charged her uncle, and gotten a stun bolt in the chest. She’d woken up in her cell wearing the same white pajamas with no idea how much time had passed. It might have been hours or even days.

“I think I know when it was implanted,” she said, “But I don’t know *why*. You must get it out of me at once.”

“I was going to suggest a procedure at the earliest possible time,” said the doctor. “However, I can’t guarantee we can remove it. The implant does not seem to be directly hooked into your blood vessels or endocrine system, but it may still be dangerous. It may contain poison, for instance.”

“If they put this in me to hurt me if I escaped, or keep me from escaping, it didn’t do its job.”

“Indeed. But the possibility must be considered.”

“What about a tracker?” Ganner said with a whisper. “When we came in on *Starlight Champion* to pick you up, a whole swarm of TIEs came on us. They knew you were escaping and they seemed to know we were coming to help.”

Treis hadn’t heard that part. He immediately began reviewing actions in his mind, wondering if he’d done anything that might have tipped off Chalk.

But the doctor said, “Our scanner would have picked up any data being transmitted or received by the device. Right now it is most certainly inert.” That was some relief,

anyway. The Drall quickly dashed it by adding, "That may change as soon as we attempt to remove the device."

Marasiah scowled. "If my uncle implanted this thing in me, I'm sure he had a very awful reason to do it. Before we do anything else, we need to find out what it is."

"I understand. But this will be a careful procedure. We will have to render you unconscious, then open a stasis field, then cut you open and examine the device before we make any decision."

"I don't care what you have to do," Marasiah growled. "Just get this *thing* out of me as fast as you can."

The Drallian blinked. "Of course, empress... Let me call my staff and prepare an operation room... It will take at least a half hour..."

The doctor hurried out of the room as fast as his stubby legs would carry him. Marasiah was bristling with anger, hands balled into fists. She looked desperately around the room like she wanted to hurt something.

Treis tried to soothe. "Just be calm, Majesty. We'll get to the bottom of this. Master Krieg, please find Admiral Bey and tell him what's going on."

"Right away." The younger Knight snapped a bow and hurried from the medical ward.

Then Treis was alone in the room with Marasiah. She paced tight circles, clenching and unclenching hands. "Empress, please," he said, "Try to stay calm. There was no way you could have expected this."

She spun to face him. "Yes, I should have! This is exactly the kind of thing my uncle would have done!"

"To be honest," he admitted, "I no longer have any idea what Hogrum is capable of."

"I do." Her hands squeezed tight and stayed fists. "*That* man killed my father."

Treis' first thought was that she was delusional. The stress of captivity and escape, followed by the discovery of this device inside her, had unmoored her from reality. Now she was grasping, he thought, for a way to absolve her poor husband of his regicide.

She saw his disbelief. "He *said* it to me, Treis. He told me. He blamed my father for my mother's death. He collaborated



with Morlish Veed during the war. That's how I was captured at Agamar. And when he saw a chance to goad my father he took it, knowing what would turn dark, knowing Antares would..."

Her shoulders trembled and Treis laid hands to steady them. Still working through his own shock he said, "None of us knew what Hogrum was capable of. I didn't and I've known him for forty years."

"He deserves to suffer for everything he's done," Marasiah said. "I don't know how to guarantee that yet, but I will."

Black anger choked her voice. He thought about admonishing her, but she already knew the dangers of the dark side. Because of her father, and what her uncle had done to him.

"We'll make sure the whole galaxy learns what Hogrum's done," he squeezed her shoulders. "And we will take him down together. You, me, and all the Imperial Knights. Because we are *your* Knights."

"Knights without the Force," she muttered.

"Hogrum and his pawns don't have it either. What we do have is our training, our loyalty, and *you*. That's all we need."

They were lofty words straining for truth, but Marasiah seemed a little encouraged. He'd calmed her as best he could, which wasn't much. Her revelation- which he now accepted, all doubts gone- unsettled Treis deeply, but somehow it also gave him strength. It erased his last doubts about abandoning Coruscant and collaborating with a bunch of mercenaries against the legal regent.

He was where he belonged, he was certain of it, and everything else could flow from there.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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The black spread of the galactic edge had never seemed more welcoming, though Jariah knew it was less the void that felt good and more the familiar hum of *Mynock's* systems all around him. He could almost believe his life hadn't been upended.

Ania Solo, unfortunately, wasn't helping bring back normalcy. Five people crowded in the cockpit to watch the woman's holo-image lit up over the comm console. Though it was clear she had a lot to say, she let them explain everything they'd been through first. Jao and Kyra did most of the talking, while Cade and Jariah stayed mostly silent on their experiences beyond the gate. Cade did, however, explain how Lowbacca had sacrificed himself to pull him from the eruption. Ania's face, which wore a look of bafflement through most of the explanation, went downcast.

"We're not going to contact the Jedi directly yet," Jao told her, "But do you think you can get a word to the Council about Lowbacca?"

"I can try," Ania said, and her tone said it was a lot easier said than done. "Why don't you want to hail them? I'm sure they're dying to know if you were able to get the Force back."

"Yeah, and if they find out the gate *does* work, Rohakalla's gonna be the new galactic tourism hot spot," Cade said. "Every Jedi, Imp Knight, wannabe-Sith, and wannabe-anything is going to come zeroing in on this place."

"You don't know that. The Jedi can keep secrets."

"Maybe once, but are they really Jedi anymore?" He waved a hand before anyone could try to answer. "Besides, it's not us who decide who goes through. The Keepers of the Whills make the choice. It *is* their gate."

"Okay. I understand." Ania's holographic eyes shifted to Jao. "I hope they'll at least give *you* permission to go."

He allowed a smile. "I've been talking to a few Yuuzhan Vong who are ready to take me through the gate. They'll be my guides on the other side until..." He trailed off, like he was afraid to even say it.

"Until you get the Force back." She smiled too, but it was hesitant. "I'm glad. Do you plan to go over right away?"

"I did. What's wrong?"

Ania's smile disappeared. She took a breath and explained everything.

Jariah had thought they'd been through a lot but it seemed like Ania and company had been through even more. She explained how they'd put together a team, located the empress, enlisted Alliance help, and come up with an elaborate plan to steal her from her prison in Galactic City right as everyone was distracted by the Gar Stazi's trial. Then she explained how it all had gone to hell. She still didn't know how a bunch of Alliance Crossfires had ended up bombing Coruscant, but the news-nets were all saying it was an attempt by radicals to free Stazi. The death toll was uncertain but well into the hundreds, maybe thousands. Alliance partisans in the senate were scrambling to distance themselves from Admiral Bey's absent fleet. The trial was pressing on in defiance of what Regent Chalk had declared 'a nefarious assault on Federation unity.'

The upside was that Marasiah had escaped and was meeting with Bey now to decide how to proceed. The downside was that Ania's mother had been captured.

"We're going back to Coruscant now," Ania said. "I have no idea where to look for her, but we're taking an Imperial Knight with us who might help. Azlyn Rae."

She looked to Jao for recognition, but it was Cade who swallowed and said, "Yeah. I know her. You going to waltz back in there with *Free Agent*? Sounds like you might get recognized."

"I'm aware," Ania said dryly. "So this is the part where I ask for help. I don't want to impose when you've got so much else to do."

"But you can really use us," Cade finished. "Your mom... She still got the Force?"

"Never lost it."

Jariah wasn't sure exactly how Ania and her mother were related to Cade- it sounded damned distant- but that Skywalker blood had a way of making ties that bind. Her face furrowed in thought, Kyra leaned over his chair and said, "One Force-user would help a lot with that rescue. Two's even better."

"Don't forget three," Deliah said, glancing at Jariah.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I can barely feel the kriffin' Force anymore. Gets weaker the further I get from that arch, I think." It was true, but he still felt it, and he bet it would stay with him even when they went to Coruscant. He could tell Cade wasn't pondering whether to help rescue Marin Skirata; he was thinking on *how*.

Finally he said, "It's a long way to Coruscant from here, but we'll let you know when we're inbound. You start working on a plan."

"We will," Ania nodded. "Thank you. Very much." She looked at Jao as she said it.

"The gate's not going anywhere," he told her, "Your mother's the priority."

"Agreed," said Cade, "We can't rush in just yet. We got a couple things on Rohakalla to pick up. Artoo. Couple Sith. See-Threepio." He paused. "Well, maybe we *could* leave Threepio."

"We're not leaving him," Kyra insisted.

"What Sith?" Ania asked. "Talon and her apprentice?"

"Eli's not her apprentice anymore," Kyra said. "He's not Sith either."

"So you say, but the murglack stabbed your Imp *meeskhu* here in the gut," Jariah pointed a thumb at Jao. "And his *schutta* stabbed *me*. I ain't ready to trust either of them. Which makes me wonder if we shouldn't just leave on them stranded on Rohakalla. Less chance of them doing harm there."

“Eli doesn’t deserve that,” Kyra insisted. “He’s another Force-user we can use. He’s way better at it than me.”

Cade help up a hand. “All right, all right, we’ll discuss this on the way back. Ania, we got your message. Anything else?”

“Not for now. Let me know when you’re inbound. We’ll try to scout Coruscant as best we can while we’re waiting. And thank you. So much.”

“Not a problem,” Cade said, “We’ll talk soon.”

He reached over and shut off the transmission. Then, pushing up from the pilot’s chair, he said, “Blue, Jariah, I yield helm to you. Get us back to the gate. Jao, Kyra and me are gonna have a chat about what to do with our Sith friends...”

Eli was calmer than he’d thought he’d be. That was good; though *Mynock* had left Rohakalla, the canyon and its cave warrens were filled with Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa who were variously learned in the Force and might feel his anxiety, if he had any to detect.

The only deaf being on the planet was Talon. As Eli descended the slope to the canyon floor he found her seated in front of the gate, staring up at it, silently imploring. If the Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa would feel anything in the Force, it would be her despair. She kept all of it from her face, though, and when she heard Eli approach she turned on him with a blank expression.

He dropped to a crouch beside her and said in a low voice, “There’s something I’d like you to see.”

“What?”

“Something I think the Keepers have been hiding from us. It’s hard to explain.”

He felt hope- aching, vulnerable- tug at her heart. “Please try.”

“It’s better just to show you. I left it in the cave.” He tilted his head toward the cavern they’d been kept in. “You’ll see it when you get in. Just... take a look. It’s better if you take it in by yourself.”

He was rivalling the Keepers with his cryptic answers, but that was only making Talon more keen. What he was about

to do would hurt her deeply; she'd probably never forgive him. Still, he wanted to get her away from the gate.

"I will take a look," she said plainly, and rose to her feet. "Thank you... Eli."

Talon walked casually toward the slope. Eli glanced at her as he watched the arch. All she'd find in that cave was the wreckage of Darth Traya's holocron. She'd probably assume someone else had destroyed it and that would enough to keep her in the cavern for a few minutes as she tried to puzzle things out.

A few minutes was all Eli needed. As Talon neared the warren entrance he fixed one last, long look on the hypergate arch. It might have been the oldest standing structure left in the galaxy; fitting that it would also be the gateway to a place even older, where power unthinkable surged beneath the ground and life materialized from pure will. He briefly wondered if the Kwa would allow Skywalker to bring his Jedi friends here. If the Keepers were smart they'd have disabled both *Mynock* and the Siths' scout ship the moment they set down on Rohakalla. There was still Khat Lah's Sekotan flyer, tucked away someplace in the surrounding jungle, but nobody except the Yuuzhan Vong knew how to fly that.

Yes, if they wanted their secret kept, they should have made sure of it. As it was, the Keepers were too generous. Even if they forbade Jedi to come, somebody would find them eventually, and then more people would come, and even if it took years the Force would come back to the galaxy. The Jedi would rejuvenate. The Sith would be reborn, because the Sith were *always* reborn; you could never get rid of the anger and hate and need that was part of every sentient being.

The best you could do is take away the Force's power to act through it. Calmly, confidently, Eli turned from the gate. Talon was out of sight. The Yuuzhan Vong and Kwa scattered around the canyon paid him little heed. Eli walked into a spot covered by shadows, then removed the fibercable gun he'd stolen from a supply crate brought down from *Mynock*. He aimed at the top of the layered canyon wall and let the cable shoot up as high as it would go. When it lodged

firmly in the rock near the upper edge he ordered the gun to retract. At the same time he summoned the Force to speed his ascent, and throw himself up, over, and onto the rim.

Eli used the Force to land in a crouch. As soon as he rose, he ran. Calling on the Force for additional speed he sprinted past the place where *Mynock* has been parked to the Sith scout ship. The others in the canyon would feel his exertion but they wouldn't get to him in time.

When Eli got to the ship he used a tug of the Force to lower its ramp. Before going inside he jumped and Force-threw himself higher, onto the vessel's wing. Talon had told him how the forgotten tracking transponder had doomed her escape attempt; otherwise Eli would have probably forgotten it too. The device was clamped to the ship's wing and he fixed it in his sights and attention. He stretched out with the Force, got the briefing glimpse of its internal wiring and circuitry, and with the snap of two fingers sparked a flare of energy that fried them and rendered the tracker inert. Then he dropped to the ground and raced inside the ship.

He'd given Kyra his lightsaber because he didn't want it anymore. He'd used that weapon as both Jedi and Sith and was no longer either. He hoped to never wield one again. So far so good; he closed the landing ramp and warmed the engines, and nobody had come up to stop him. The first Yuuzhan Vong launched themselves over the canyon rim as Eli powered up the repulsors and pushed himself skyward, out of their reach.

Instead of kicking in engines and shooting into the starless sky, he sloughed sideways to hover over the canyon. Directional thrusters nudged him a quarter-way around so his cockpit looked down on the hypergate just two hundred meters below. A few Yuuzhan Vong were scurrying around the canyon floor, but they had no weapons to bring him down from this range.

Eli turned on the lasers. He tilted cockpit and cannons down so they aimed directly at the top of the arch. He grabbed the firing controls and flexed his sweating palms around the control yoke.

His heart was pounding. *Now* he was nervous, but there was no going back. Eli thumbed the trigger.

A chain of laserfire shot straight into the arch's peak. Red plasma tore through the stony outer walls and exploded. Smoke furred skyward and stone and ancient machinery crashed down. Eli lowered his aim slightly and fired again, strafing left-to-right and tearing down the arch from either side. With the keystone gone the imposts collapsed inward. Rubble spilled across a canyon floor filling with dust and smoke.

In the Force, Eli felt panic below. He didn't think he'd killed anyone had and tried not to. Either way, he'd done what had to be done.

He tilted the ship skyward and the ruined gate slid out of view. Finally, Eli put power to engines and stabbed up through Rohakalla's atmosphere. As he shuddered through the upper layers he banked and reoriented himself. The system's twin suns, spectral blue and white, flared small but bright against the black of the intergalactic void.

He checked his scanners. No Sekotan flyer coming from below. No *Mynock*, not yet. He didn't want to be here when Skywalker and Kyra returned. He pointed the ship toward the broad milky disc that was the galaxy and began setting hyperspace coordinates. His hands were trembling so hard he could barely finish the task.

It was done, Eli told himself, and he'd done what he had to do. But the job wasn't complete. As Talon had suggested, there might be other ways to bring back the Force, more ancient routes to timeless planets still volatile with raw power. He couldn't take care of all of them alone, but he had some ideas on where to start. If nothing else, he had a long, lonely ride back to the heart of the galaxy to make up a plan.

When he had a course pressed in, Eli put a hand on the throttle and paused. Rohakalla was far below him out, of view. So were the eerie twin stars. He'd been changed beyond measure here and he'd never see any of them again.

The thought brought him calm. When Eli pulled the throttle and flung himself into hyperspace his hands had finally stopped shaking.

When *Mynock* swung low over the canyon and found it choked with dust and smoke, Kyra knew exactly what had



happened. The others were all squawking confusion, but she knew in an instant, and she knew it was her fault.

They set *Mynock* down at the top of the cliff, right where they'd left it. When they saw the Sith scout ship was gone the others started to understand. They quickly pushed the repulsor-sled out of *Mynock*'s berth and lowered themselves to the canyon floor, where the dust was starting to clear. She sensed several Kwa were calling on the Force itself to rally great gusts of wind that swept down the canyon and scattered the dust. What was left of the hypergate became visible, and it was so little: just the stout base of either side of the arch, surrounded on all sides by crumbled stone and blackened, twisted remnants of machinery older than the Jedi themselves. The crash must have been thunderous but the debris was mostly settled by now; the loudest sound in the canyon was a series of wails that sent shivers down Kyra's spine. She realized with a start that it was some of the Kwa, droning on in grief or agony.

She felt it from them in the Force and she felt it from the man beside her. Jao was frozen in place, staring at the ruin with wide eyes and a force twisted as with pain. Like a good Imperial Knight, trained to follow orders and sacrifice his own interest for the greater good, Jao had put aside his aching desire to touch the Force. He'd let Kyra and Cade go through first. He'd just barely missed the blast of Force-energy that had empowered Lowbacca and Jariah instead. And he'd agreed to stay behind and keep watch over Talon while the others went through.

All the while, Jao had waited with fragile patience in the belief that soon he'd get to go through the gate and return with the Force he craved.

Now he'd never get it back. He looked like he was about to break down in tears.

The others were different. Jariah and Deliah jogged toward the ruin to see if anyone was hurt. From Cade, Kyra felt more mixed emotions. He was shocked and angry but also, she felt, relieved, and she didn't know why.

When Cade started toward the wreckage she joined him. They spotted Khat Lah shouting orders to his warriors, who seemed slightly less stricken than the Kwa. They also saw a

solitary figure, all scarlet and black, wandering through the thinning haze as though lost in a daze.

As soon as they got close, Cade reached out with the Force and spun Talon to face them. He barked, "Where's your boytoy, *schutta*? How'd he do this?"

Kyra grabbed his arm. "Wait! It wasn't her, it was just Eli!"

When Cade's anger simmered he saw it was true. Talon's face, normally stoic in its beauty, was wilted. In the Force she emanated the same catastrophic grief as Jao.

"Eli did this? All by himself?" Cade spun on Kyra and grabbed her by the arms. "What the kark was he *thinking*?"

"He thought- He thought-"

Kyra stuttered; she couldn't collect her thoughts or get the words out. She should have seen it coming. During their long trek across that strange world Eli had been growing more and more alienated from the Force. He'd started taking Darth Traya's talks to heart, but in a different way than Kyra had. And he'd straight-up told her that he'd banished his ghosts by transposing his hatred for them onto the Force itself.

All the time she'd been afraid he might go dark again, and she'd missed all the obvious signs.

"This is my fault," she croaked. "I should have seen it. He almost *told* me and I just- I just-"

"Dammit!" Cade snarled. He released her and stalked in search of questions with answers.

She staggered after him, because it was the only thing she could do. Cade found Khat Lah and called the Yuuzhan Vong's name.

"Cade Skywalker. You see what has happened. It was Eli Horn."

"Yeah, I get that! I'm trying to figure out why but-" He waved an arm at Kyra. "Nobody seems to have an answer."

"I do not know," Khat Lah admitted. "I... have barely talked with him since we returned from the other side. I should have found the time.

"Oh, fierfek," Cade ran hands through his messy hair. "This isn't time for a pity-party. *Eli*'s the one who karked things up, not you two. Forget *why* he did it. What can we do to help?"

The Yuuzhan Vong waved at the debris. "You see what he has done. The gate is destroyed. We can never repair it. It was a miracle that we fixed it the first time."

Cade growled again. There was no outlet for his frustration and now way to fix what had been done. Yet despite it, Kyra still felt a little relief inside him.

"We gotta do something," he said finally. "None of this would've happened if we hadn't brought him here."

Khat Lah sighed. "You yourself said to forget *why*. Right now, we must pick up pieces. It appears no one was seriously injured, but many have minor wounds. And the Keepers must consider whether to remain on Rohakalla or evacuate."

"Evacuate?" Kyra frowned.

"Today Eli saw fit to destroy the gate. Tomorrow or the next day? Perhaps he will bring allies to destroy the Keepers and their Journal. We cannot say."

Kyra's instinct was to say that would never happen but that was foolish. She'd trusted Eli too much already. She'd given him the benefit of too many doubts and this was the result.

Cade asked, "What kind of allies? The Sith are all gone."

"I do not know. I am merely voicing options." Khat Lah looked at the some of the Kwa who'd gathered near the rubble to wail their anguish. "The Keepers have guarded this gate for longer than any of us can conceive, for generations on generations. Now the gate is *gone*. They have failed their mission and they have failed their ancestors."

Cade nodded. He didn't say he understood; none of them could.

Cautiously, Kyra touched his arm. "What about Ania? She still needs our help."

Cade sighed again. Khat Lah said, "If you have other obligations, you should see to them."

"We can't just leave you like this."

He eyed the grieving Kwa again. "This is the greatest disaster they have ever known, Cade Skywalker, and as you said, *you* brought Eli Horn here. These are powerful beings and while they swear fealty to the light side of the Force... it is safer for you to be gone from here."

Cade sucked in breath. "What about you?"

“The Keepers know and trust me better than you... or they did. We still have our ship in the forest. If we need to, we can leave this place.”

“Okay,” he said. The other words caught in his throat. None of them meant anything after what had happened.

Khat Lah knew it too, and he touched Cade’s shoulder. “Go, please. Go someplace where you can still bring help instead of disaster.”

## Chapter Thirty-Five

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Stars swept fast outside her cockpit bubble as Anj Dahl realigned her Crossfire for one last hyperspace jump. When her nav computer reported she'd hit proper telemetry she stilled the stars, checked her scanners, and waited the five other Rogues she'd brought with her to report they, too, had proper alignment.

Once everyone had checked in, she fired her hyperdrive and jumped into the lightspeed whirl that would take her home.

They'd been given- or more accurately volunteered for- a mission to contact Admiral Slossar, and for that Anj and half of Rogue Squadron had gone through as half-dozen lightspeed jumps of variable length to put them far away from Jhoram Bey's fleet. Then, assured that their transmission could not be traced and *Alliance's* location revealed, they set about the task of hailing the Sluissi admiral on a special executive frequency given to them by Jhoram.

Once sending the hail it had been a long wait in deep space, but eventually they'd made contact and Anj had been able to speak with Slossar directly. She'd explained all the crazy events of the past few days, including the empress' rescue and their version of the tragedy on Coruscant. Slossar had seemed baffled and incredulous before finally saying he'd take their story into account and asking what Jhoram's next step would be.

Anj was ninety-nine percent sure she could trust Slossar, but for the one percent she kept things vague. She said Jhoram and the empress intended to put out a joint statement

and asked Slossar how he'd respond when things got invariable messy. He said that most of his people, still stuck on the far side of the galaxy battling Ssi-ruuvi holdouts, refused to believe that some of their own would ravage Coruscant. He said they'd be happy to believe a different story and happy to help Jhoram and the empress when the time came.

No further details were determined, but Anj decided that was the best she could have hoped for. Contact made and message delivered, she and her Rogues began to long flight back to the *Alliance*.

The last lightspeed jump was a short one, less than ten minutes. She was getting to the end and looking forward to escaping her cramped cockpit when a jarring grip suddenly seized her ship. Hyperspace tumbled away; Anj's heart jumped. She knew what it was like to be torn from lightspeed by an artificial gravity well but when stars appeared ahead of her she saw nothing interdicator cruisers lying in wait. Her scanners, too, picked up nothing except the other five Crossfires, though everything was marred by bursts of static.

"Lead, what the hells is going on?" Rogue Four asked. "What pulled us out of hyperspace?"

"I'm not sure," Anj grimaced and swung her starfighter about, searching with bare eyes for the source of their problem. She picked up an object against the stars, bigger than a light-point and colored faintly gray. "On me, point oh-seven-five. I see something."

The Crossfires leaped forward, opening S-foils and charging weapons. The object was getting bigger ahead but her scanners were snowed over with interference, and she realized this device must not only have dragged them from hyperspace, it must have jammed sensors too.

Anj was getting a sinking feeling as to what this was. When her Crossfires got close they pulled a tight circle around the object and saw it for what it was: a near-sphere about the size of a light freighter, with small directional thrusters and electronic interference devices attached to a self-powered gravity well projector.

"Pulse mass mines," Anj told her pilots. "It's a Hapan device."

"And what's it doing here?" asked Rogue Two.

Anj didn't know and was pretty sure she'd hate the answer. "We're not going anywhere until we take it out. Let's circle around for a pass."

The Crossfires shot well clear of the mine, then spun back for an attack run. The jamming was so strong it rendered their targeting computers useless- Anj was pretty sure that was the point- but after dropping speed their eyes able to get a clear lock on it.

"Can't tell if that thing's shielded," Anj admitted. "Let's pop two torps each one my mark. Get ready. One. Two. Three. Mark!"

Twelve warheads streaked ahead toward the target. Some pilots peeled away but Anj killed thrusters and used retro-burners to decelerate further. Since sensors were busted she needed to watch the impact with her own eyes.

Twelve glowing thrusters converged on the spherical mine. She caught the first set of explosions haloed by shield scatter, but the next bursts tore open the sphere and spilled gnarled debris into space. That got a few rousing cheers from her pilots but Anj was more intent on her sensors. With the mine gone some clarity returned but not all. There were other mines out there and it seemed they were still stuck in an artificial gravity well, albeit one weaker than before.

"Don't celebrate yet. Everybody, form on my wing," Anj commanded as she pulled clear of the destroyed Hapan device. "There's still more of those mines out there. Maybe a *lot* more."

Rogue Five asked, "How many do you think, Lead?"

Anj tried to reason it out and felt cold ice grip her stomach. These mines could only have been laid for one purpose: to block the escape of Admiral Bey's fleet from its current deep-space hiding spot. From that location Jhoram could, hypothetically, jump in any direction, and to wall him in fully would take thousands of mines.

"I don't think I can count that high," Anj said grimly. "They've thrown up a hyperspace blockade. They've found us and they're walling us in." The only response on her comm was horrified static. She continued, "Stand by. I'm going to try and contact the fleet."

Anj switched frequencies and hailed *Alliance* but got not reply. Her heart sunk further. If the fleet wasn't under attack already it would be soon; either way, a jamming field had clearly been raised to squelch all transmissions as surely as these mines would cut off hyperspace exits.

She didn't know how they'd been found, but Chalk's fleets intended to finish them. She fought a panicked urge to run back to deeper space and said, "Come on, let's find a few more mines and take 'em out. As soon as we punch a hole in this wall we're jumping back to the fleet. If we're lucky, we're not already too late."

On her order, the six Rogues scattered formation and began scouring the starfield for more mines. It didn't take long for Rogue Three to spot another and call all fighters on the target, but that didn't give Anj much hope. She was pretty sure they were already long out of luck.

When alarms sounded through *Alliance's* halls, Ganner's first reaction was disbelief. They couldn't be under attack; it had to be a drill, or a malfunction of the ship's systems. As he grappled with the impossible, Treis Sinde sprung to action. The older Knight got on the medical center's internal comm and contacted the bridge, which confirmed that, yes, a number of star destroyers had just decanted from hyperspace at points surrounding the fleet.

Ganner's mind still struggled to understand how this had happened. Treis clamped his shoulders and said, "You have to stay here, Ganner. Watch over the empress. Do *anything* to protect her. Do you understand?"

Ganner found himself nodding. "Yes. Of course. I will."

And with a flash of scarlet, Treis hurried from the med center to the bridge, leaving Ganner alone.

Down here he felt helpless, trapped and confused. Pacing tight circles outside the door to the operations room where Marasiah's implant was being removed, he tried to figure out how they'd been found. The implant itself was not a transmitter; so the doctor had said. He doubted anyone had slapped a tracer on *Free Agent* or any of the Rogues during their escape from Coruscant. Maybe one had landed on *Mon Elusia*. Maybe it had happened some other way. Maybe one



of those Mandalorians had betrayed them somehow; he'd never fully trusted them.

The alarms blared on until Ganner almost got used to them. He knew nothing about the battle going on outside. He felt no shaking in the ship's deck but the medcenter was deep inside *Alliance's* bowels and far from the impact of warheads and turbolasers. The battle might already be blazing outside. He slipped past the secure cordon protecting Marasiah and checked the other portions of the medcenter. Most of the beds were still empty, which meant the ship hadn't taken a lot of damage, not yet.

Ganner was about to go back to the operations room when a hand clasped his arm so hard it hurt. He let out a shocked, pained yelp and saw Saara Derrol, on her feet beside him, shiny metal fingers squeezed tight on his bicep.

"I'm sorry," the young woman said, withdrawing the hand. She flexed the fingers; metal joints clicked audibly. If the medics were planning to apply blue synthskin, they hadn't gotten around to it yet. "This is new. I'm still not sure how to control it."

"It's all right." Ganner flexed his sore arm. At least he still had his. "Miss Derrol, the ship's under attack. I'm not sure about the specifics. Please go back to your bed, where it's safe."

"If we're under attack it's not safe anywhere." She was young but she spoke with an older woman's severity. "My husband's on the bridge. I need to go to him--"

"From what I heard, you being on the bridge during a fight is how you ended up here. Please, leave that to soldiers."

She rankled but didn't break for the exit. Instead she glanced at the security cordon. "Is the empress in there?"

Ganner stared. "The empress? I don't--"

"I know what we went all the way to Coruscant to get." The fingers on her new hand twitched. "Is she in there?"

"Yes," he admitted. "She's undergoing a medical procedure. I think they're almost done. If you'll excuse me, I need to check on her."

Frustration and helplessness scrunched Saara's face tight. Ganner understood her emotions completely, but he had better things to do than commiserate with the senator's wife.

"Stay here, please," he told her. "I'll check on the empress... then I'll come back out."

She nodded acquiescence. Ganner left her behind and skipped through the cordon and back to the operation room's entrance, just in time for the short, furry Drallish doctor to come through the door.

Hurriedly he asked, "Is it done? Have you taken out the implant?"

"Yes. The empress is still under sedation and will take some time to recover."

Ganner wasn't sure if they had any time at all. If they'd have to move the empress while unconscious he had no idea how to do it. "Do you know what the device is?"

"We have some idea." The doctor gave a whistling sigh. "During the procedure, we detected a short energy burst from the implant. We had no way of interpreting the burst with our medical instruments, but it seems to match the output required for a long-range broadcast transmission."

A tracer. Pieces fell into place. Ganner remember the device Sauk had fixed up that let them track both Sinde and Hogram Chalk. In order to avoid the detection the device issued a short burst every half hour instead of transmitting its location constantly. The implant in Marasiah must have functioned the same way but on a larger scale, with higher-powered bursts and probably lower emission frequency.

Either way, he understood now how they'd been tracked to this location. And he understood that the newly-joined fight was well out of his hands.

It was probably beyond saving entirely. Panic seized him and he struggled for self-control. There was only one place Ganner still had some agency. "When do you think the empress will wake up?"

"The anesthetic normally takes several hours more to wear off... But given the circumstances, there are ways to hasten the process."

"Do it," Ganner said, and the doctor hurried back to the operations room without argument.

Once he was gone, Ganner went to the room's computer terminal and began scouring a map of the *Alliance's* sprawling interior. If they had to run, he needed to know

where to. Protecting the Empress was his first duty as an Imperial Knight. Now it was his only one left.

By the time Treis got to *Alliance's* bridge the battle had already begun. As yet it hadn't reached the flagship itself; the mighty star destroyer was tucked at the center of the formation and Mon Cal cruisers had pulled close to protect it at all points. Those cruisers had also launched their fighter wings, and Treis could see dozens of tiny ships swarming around *Alliance's* hull in anticipation of the coming assault. In the far distance he caught the first explosive sparks of a battle joined but he couldn't make out the attacking star destroyers with his naked eyes.

When Treis looked at the tactical holo to get an understanding of the fight, his heart dropped to his stomach. There had to be twenty star destroyers and twice as many support ships forming a loose sphere around the Alliance fleet. Among them were a pair of interdictors with gravity wells online, trapping everyone in realspace. It was a staggering fleet; dumbly, Treis wondered how Hogrum had gathered so many ships so quickly.

In the face of a surprise attack he expected the bridge to be a bedlam, but Bey's people were reacting like professionals. Though tense, they were all doing their jobs, prepping systems for a fight and plotting possible courses of action.

Treis located Bey standing in the middle of it all, eerily calm as he contemplated the tactical holo. Treis sidled next to him and said, "I'm sorry, Admiral. If we were in any way responsible for bringing these ships down on you—"

The Weequay held up a hand. "Save it. I need to concentrate on the battle, not recriminations."

"They have us boxed in very effectively," Treis said unnecessarily.

"Better than you know. Rogue Squadron reports they've laid fields of Hapan pulse mass generator mines two lightyears outside the battle zone."

Treis had seen those devices in action before, a long time back. Though less defended than actual interdictor cruisers they had much the same effect, and their jamming fields did a good job of messing with targeting sensors that could have

otherwise picked them off easily. He recalled Hogrum's meetings with Hapan representatives followed Marasiah's faux-funeral; suddenly those made much more sense.

"Anj and her pilots carved us an escape vector, right here." Bey pointed to a red X hovering on the edge of the tactical holo. "That can get us through *that* drag field but we still need to handle the other interditors."

The attacking fleet had spread its two drag ships wide to maximize the interdiction field. One sat at the north pole of the battle, the other to the south. Neither was anywhere close to the exit vector that would free them from this tightening cage.

Treis glanced out the viewport at far-off explosions, then back at the holo. "Did they hail us and order a surrender?"

"No," Bey shook his head. "They dropped from hyperspace, moved to targeting range, and immediately opened fire. They've also thrown up a jamming field, high-intensity. We can barely communicate with our own ships, let alone theirs."

It all made horrifying sense. The pilots and crewmen in those ships all believed they were attacking the murderous terrorists who'd ravaged Coruscant. Hogrum would have ordered them to block all transmissions from the enemy to prevent them from learning the truth: that they were attacking their own empress.

It was cruel and ruthless, simple and effective. Compounded with Marasiah's fresh revelations it sickened him. He'd known Hogrum for forty years, two thirds of his life. The man had been distant, sometimes cold and often inscrutable, but he'd never imagined he could orchestrate such atrocity. If the attacking fleet really had been ordered to wipe out the Alliance ships the death toll would be staggering.

The empress, Hogrum's niece, only child of his beloved Elliah, would be among them. Treis could almost fathom the rest of it, but not that murder.

As Bey took reports, Treis stared at the holo and struggled to react. He wanted to throw Marasiah, awake or not, onto a ship and rush her out of here, but there was no place to run to as long as those drag ships were working. For now the safest

place in the battlezone was *Alliance's* medcenter, but that wouldn't last forever.

"All right," Bey snapped for the whole bridge to hear, "It's time to go on the offensive! I want Captain Hollux to take his battle group up to the north pole and begin an attack on that drag ship. Tell Captain Grevark to feint at the one to the south. *Mon Elusia* holds beneath us and backs up Grevark."

The tactical crew hurried to convey his commands. All the hesitation and doubt that the choked the admiral before seemed disappeared. Bey was a warrior at least and now he had his war. He wasn't happy, but he was determined. Grim clarity had given him strength.

Order given, the Weequay hurried to the comm station, calling, "Get me a secure line with Captain Errangar. I have a special job for him..."

Within minutes Alliance ships started shifting position and launching desperate offensives. They were outgunned more than two-to-one but Hogrum had left them with no chance but to fight ferociously. Treis watched through the viewport as space around them lit brighter than ever with explosions. The first missiles, launched from TIEs on a bombing run, impacted on *Alliance's* forward shields and sent faint tremors through the command deck. Treis knew it was just the first raindrop of a storm.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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It was a reunion, but it didn't feel much like one.

When *Free Agent* and *Mynock* met up in deep space they immediately joined airlocks. After Ania passed through and went into *Mynock's* crew lounge she found familiar faces all changed. Jao looked like a man lost in deep grief; she'd heard about the hypergate's destruction but the reality didn't hit her until she saw him. Cade Skywalker looked distracted, and it was rubbing off on Deliah. She couldn't tell what was up with Jariah Syn but something sure was. Kyra might have changed the most; her eyes had been drained of the old wonder than Ania remembered. The only ones who really seemed unchanged were the droids.

The biggest surprise, though, was Darth Talon. The Twi'lek woman had no weapons on her person but no binders either. She just sulked against the back wall, watching them as they talked, saying nothing.

When Ania asked Cade in a whisper why they had Talon aboard he'd shrugged and said, "Somebody's got to take her."

They all needed a lot of catch-up, but there was no time for it. They had a rescue to plan.

"Our Mando friends have been scouting Galactic City, trying to pick up any signs of where they might have taken my mother," Ania told them. She'd been protective of Marin's identity in the past, but the time for that was over. "They say the airspace over the government district is locked down pretty tight, which you'd expect after the attacks, but

civilian ships can still pass through as long as they stay in assigned traffic lanes. Hondo's been taking his *Black Justice* through the loops and mapping security patrols."

"That's well and good," said Cade, "But do they have any idea where Chalk's got your mom?"

"Not specifically," Azlyn said. "I gave them a list of five facilities where I know his intel people store prisoners. She could be in any of those, or someplace else entirely."

"Then I guess that's what you need me for. See if I can figure out which one."

"That's the short of it," Ania said. "I'm hoping you can take *Mynock* in loops through Galactic City, do some Force-magic, and pinpoint which building she's in. Maybe even communicate with her and tell her we're coming to help, if the Force can do that for you."

"It might. This ma of yours, you said she had Jedi training, right?"

"That's right. She used the Force to track Hogrum Chalk, and that led us to the empress. Now that we have two Force-users..." She shrugged. "Well, I'm sure you can accomplish more."

"Not just two." Cade looked across the room. "You wanna come along and lend a hand, *cheeka*?"

"Absolutely," Kyra said. She ran a palm down the lightsaber attached to her belt. It wasn't Jao's; Ania had never seen it before and didn't know how she got it.

"Good to know." Cade shifted eyes to Jariah. "You can help out too, you know."

"Not like you can," Jariah said, "But I figure me and Blue and pilot *Mynock* while you're doing all your meditating."

"Knew I could count on you guys."

Jariah scowled anyway.

Ania knew she was missing something but didn't have time to guess. She said, "That's a good basic plan. After the way we busted out, I don't want to take *Free Agent* back to Coruscant again. That means it's staying in deep space, emergency use only. I'm hoping *Mynock* and Hondo's ship will be enough to cover our escape." She looked at the people who'd come with her from *Free Agent*. "Obviously, I'm going with *Mynock*. Sauk, I know you're still a little

rattled from the head injury. Can you man the ship while we're away?"

"Don't worry, Ania, I can handle it."

"Good. A-gee, I know it's your ship, but-"

"I have a debt to Solos," the droid said calmly. "Your mother is included in that category. There is no telling how much help she'll require. Therefore, I will come with you to Coruscant."

"I figured you'd say that." Ania smiled softly. "And Azlyn, I'm guessing you're going to come too."

"The empress charged me with rescuing her mother. Of course I'll come." The scarred woman shifted her gaze to Cade. "Looks like you're stuck with me for a little while."

He looked away, uncharacteristically awkward. "We'll make it work. You try to contact any of your buddies on Coruscant?"

"I don't think I have many buddies left," Azlyn admitted. "At least, not in the Knights. We don't know who we can trust anymore."

"What about the Jedi? You got friends there, don't you? Rasi Tuum? Shado?"

"Master Tuum doesn't know about any of this. At least, we haven't told him. As for Shado..." Now Azlyn looked awkward. "I don't know. He helped us on our first attempt to rescue the empress, but he didn't escape with us. And I've been trying to contact him since, but he's not responding."

"Huh. Doesn't sound like Shado. He's always been the dependable one."

"I don't know the specifics, but I think he's been through a lot, Cade."

"Yeah, well, who hasn't? If we can't depend on Shado, fine. We got good help already." He looked around the packed crew lounge. "And a full boat. You okay leaving just one person on *Free Agent*?"

"I'll stay too," Jao said. Ania couldn't hide her surprise. He saw that and added, "Sauk could always use a co-pilot. You never know if we might get into trouble. Besides... it's been a while since I've been aboard."

It made sense and nobody argued, but his decision still stung Ania. She'd assumed that, once she finished chasing



after her mother and Jao finished chasing the Force, they'd end up in the same place as they'd started, on the same mismatched but trust-bound team. But that had been stupid. She should have known as well as anybody that things didn't magically go back to the way they were.

Pushing her disquiet aside, Ania looked to Darth Talon, a black and red statue on the far wall. "What about her? Don't you want to lock her up somewhere?"

"I was thinking about that," Cade said. "Or maybe we could do a prison swap. Your mom for the Sith *schutta*. I'm sure Chalk knows how to deal with them."

"I'm pretty sure he killed Darth Havok," Azlyn said darkly. "Maybe with his own saber."

Talon didn't seem phased by the death threats. She didn't seem to care about anything. In a very dull voice she said, "You can do with me what you wish."

"Good." Cade told the crowd, "I like her better when she's not feisty." Somehow, Ania sensed that wasn't true.

"If Talon's staying here, then let's get ready to split up," she said. "The sooner we get there the faster we find her and get her out."

She didn't want to add that mother might be dead already. Cade didn't say anything about feeling some disturbance in the Force, but she gathered he'd been busy.

As the group broke and began switching places, Ania stepped slowly to Jariah Syn, who watched it all with an almost Talon-like detachment. She asked him, "Are you going to be good to fly?"

"Me? Sure. Blue'll be handling the stick anyway. I'll do guns." Absently he added, "I like guns."

"I get that," Ania said as she watched Jao and Sauk head back toward the airlock. AG-37 stomped after them to retrieve supplies. She caught Azlyn sharing a long look with Cade before she, too, ducked back into *Free Agent*.

"Didn't realize Cade knew Azlyn Rae," Ania muttered.

Jariah snorted. "Knew? She used to be his *municheeka*, long time back."

"Really." Ania blinked. "Well. It's a small galaxy."

"Ain't it just? Weird one too. Your *meeshku patogga*'s in a funk, by the way."

"He's not my... whatever. But I noticed."

"I gotta say, I feel for the guy. He didn't do anything wrong, but everything still went bad for him. Which is worse than *poodoo* being your fault, in a way."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Cheer him up if you can, after we get your ma back. First things first."

"Right. First things first."

Ania had a few things to pick up from *Free Agent* too. She ducked back into the ship, gathered her weapons, then headed back to the airlock. AG-37 and Azlyn had already just through. Jao was there at the threshold, watching them pass.

"Thanks for minding the ship," Ania told him.

"Don't mention it." They were avoiding each other's eyes.

"Does it feel good to be back home?"

He looked around the cramped chamber. "I don't know. Maybe. Give me time to figure it out."

"Right." Ania hesitated. The space between them was short but seemed huge. Instead of leaning in for a hug she extended a hand. Jao shook it firmly but once, and then she slipped through the airlock and sealed it behind her. Within minutes the ships had separated and *Mynock* was on an inbound course of Coruscant, where her mother awaited.

First things first.

Marin had done her best. She'd strung her captors along with the hint of more information. When her Kubaz interrogator had come to her with scraps of data on the transit department building she'd played along, giving him a mostly-accurate summary of what she'd seen before. Then her captors left her alone for a while. They'd moved her into a tiny cell with a bunk. Standard days passed and her only visitors were droids passing meals through the slot in the door.

It reinforced her impression that her captors didn't care much about their sole prisoner, which only worried her more.

With so little to do, Marin tried to spend more time in the Force. She'd lay stomach-up on her bed, close her eyes, feign sleep for the holo-cam and spread her awareness outward.

She'd feel all the half-bored minds in the surrounding building and the vague presence of Coruscant's billions beyond. Sometimes she thought she sensed Hogrums Chalk's half-remembered self, but she wasn't sure.

What she did know for certain was that of Galactic City's sprawling population, not a one of them could use the Force. She thought she was used to that. It had been a very long time since she was in the company of Jedi. Still, she felt lonely and small.

And then, one evening when her cell's overhead lights had been dimmed for sleep, she felt someone touch her back.

It was such a novel sensation she barely recognized it at first. Marin took a long time to respond. She probed outward and felt one firm Force-presence, not immediately near but somewhere among Galactic City's swarms. The presence emanated harsh wisdom and strong will. It knew exactly who she was and had been searching for her. To Marin's surprise she sensed a second presence also. It was weaker, fainter, but just as determined to save her. It almost felt like a padawan's Force-signature. Neither of them was Marasiah Fel, she was sure of that.

In addition to hope, Marin felt stirrings of wonder. Maybe Cade Skywalker had succeeded on his mad, strange quest to unlock the Force.

Lying on her bed she concentrated, trying to tell the searchers where she was. She projected images of her cell and the hard corridors beyond and hoped they understood. She had nothing more to tell them, as she didn't know where in Galactic City she was being held. They told her they'd figured it out and were inbound. She told them to be careful; she was under heavy guard and well inside a secure facility.

They told her to be patient. They'd figure it out.

She tried to ask them for their names, but the Force-bond weakened as her rescuers concentrated on devising a plan. Nonetheless, Marin felt warmed inside. Just when she'd started to lose faith in her future it had come back to her. The Force had delivered it. Her feelings toward her inborn power had vacillated for many years, but now, after so many decades, she was glad to have it and would never turn her back on it again.

Satisfied, Marin stayed on the bed, half-attuned to the Force, half-resting, and waited for the next signal from her saviors.

That lasted an hour, two at most. Then the door to her cell clanked noisily open, jerking her out of near-sleep. Lights in the hallway beyond were as bright and stark as ever and she squinted as she struggled to sit upright. The silhouette in front of her resolved into her Kubaz interrogator.

"Good evening, Miss Ghitsoc," the Kubaz said. "I hope I didn't ruin your slumber."

"Why are you here? What time is it?" She didn't have to feign grogginess.

"It is late, I'm sorry to say, but this was the only time the Regent was available to speak with you."

That chased tiredness away. "Hogrum Chalk wants to talk with me?"

"You've stolen something very important from him. He's been following your interrogation closely, though he's not had time to supervise it until now. Cleaning up that attack by Alliance terrorists, you understand. But he's opened up a few hours in his schedule to talk to you personally."

She tried to put on the gruff Mando act. "Does Chalk always interrogate prisoners himself, or should I feel honored?"

"Oh, you should definitely be honored. Mind you, Regent Chalk was our intelligence director before that, and a capable spy. He knows how to get information from people."

"Better than you?"

That didn't rile him. "Please, Miss Ghitsoc, on your feet. You don't want to keep the regent waiting."

Marin rose slowly. As the Kubaz led her out to the hall, where two stormtrooper guards were waiting, she reached out with the Force. She found the minds that had touched her earlier and tried to tell them she was on the move. Then she reached out to find Chalk's presence.

He was nowhere nearby. She was certain of that. As the stormtroopers slapped stun cuffs on her wrists and nudged her down the long blank hall she asked the Kubaz, "How far away's your boss? Do I get to see his office?"

"No, Miss Ghitsoc, we'll handle your interrogation in this building," he assured.

It was a lie. Chalk wasn't here and she wasn't going to be an interrogation. Through the Force she could read the Kubaz's intentions clearly. She was about to be taken to a bleak white-walled room, put up against a wall, and shot in dead of night.

She'd tried to make herself useful to her captors while slowly understanding they had no use for her at all. Now they would get rid of her, just like they'd silence anyone else who knew Marasiah was alive.

She tried to hide her panic and reach out into the Force. She told her would-be rescuers that she was under threat and she needed help *now*. They got that and told her to hold tight and stay alive.

She'd do her best. For now she was on her own and Marin scoured the surrounding halls with the Force. At this late hour most of the building was emptied. Aside from the Kubaz and her two troopers she felt two alert minds nearby, both awaiting on a floor two levels beneath them. That was probably where they'd execute her.

To get there they'd have to take a lift. The Kubaz led her down a sharp corner and the tube entrance loomed ahead of them. Marin calculated options fast. They were in the heart of the vast building and the lift was her fastest way to an exit. The double-doors slid apart and the compact lift car was open and waiting. As she stepped into it her eyes darted up. One security camera directly overhead.

Marin, the stormtroopers, and the Kubaz all stepped inside. The doors slid shut. The Kubaz stabbed a button, ordering them from Level Twenty-Five down to Level Twenty-Seven. Like most bottomless Coruscanti buildings, storeys were counted from the top-down.

Two levels wasn't a lot of time to move. Marin did it fast. As soon as the doors hissed shut and the lift dropped she called on the Force to blur the camera, then knocked both stormtroopers hard. As their armor cracked against the walls she spun on the Kubaz; he was reaching for the controls to the stun cuffs but she snapped an elbow in his breathing mask first. The Kubaz retched and gasped for air. She called on the Force again and plucked his hold-out pistol from its holster. The weapon smacked in her bound-together hands as

the troopers rebounded. She positioned herself behind the Kubaz to use him as a body shield and Force-smacked the troopers back again. Two laser bolts dropped them. The Kubaz's pistol was already set to stun, so she shifted her grip and pumped one more blue blast into her interrogator's chest.

It took all of five seconds. Marin was panting with exertion as the lift doors opened on the long, empty corridor ahead. She considered for a moment, then took the stun cuff controls from the Kubaz's hand and released herself. Then she tossed aside the hold-out pistol and lifted a military-grade blaster rifle from each trooper. Finally, Marin used the Force to shove all three bodies out into the hall. Then she tapped the lift controls and flung herself upward toward the next challenge.

As *Mynock* banked over the government district and accelerated toward their destination- a stout, modest skyscraper affiliated with the Federation Security Bureau- Kyra felt herself drawn into a mind not her own. It was a strange experience; she'd thought she'd felt everything the Force had to offer on the other side of the gate but this was different. Kyra was still fully herself but faint emotions naggd the edge of her awareness, emotions that were clearly foreign. She felt fear, adrenaline-rush, and weird thrill from Marin Skirata. It all came on her at once and she understood that the old woman had been thrown into a fight.

Then the feeling ebbed, but Kyra knew it would come back. Peering over Deliah and Jariah as they steered *Mynock*, she whispered, "Did you feel that?"

Cade and Ania were crammed beside her. The former said, "Yeah, I got something. She's in the thick of it."

"What does *that* mean?" Ania looked between them, clearly frustrated at being locked out.

"It means she'd trying to bust out on her own," Cade said. "Might've been she had no choice. I dunno."

"But she's in that building?" Ania stabbed a finger at the window. The southeast corner of the government district had restricted airspace and increased speeder patrols. No surprise, given that the towers there were operated by the Federation's intelligence and security agencies.

“Yeah, she’s there. No idea how close she is to escape, though, which means we’re gonna have to bust in.”

“Great,” Ania growled, but Kyra could tell she felt neither fear nor hesitation. “Time to get moving. Call Hondo.”

“Coming right up.” Jariah’s fingers tapped the comm console. “*Black Justice*, you there?”

“We read you,” a Mandalorian voice scratched over the speaker. “We see you inbound.”

Ania leaned over Jariah’s shoulder. “It’s time to insert. We’ll need you to distract them.”

“I know, *cyar’ika*, we went over the plain. Tell us when to go in.”

Ania looked to Cade. Cade said, “Charge in when you’re ready. We’ll be right behind you.”

“*Oya*. See you around, you crazy *shabuire*.”

The comm clicked off. Deliah, gripping the throttle tight, asked, “Was that a compliment?”

“In this context, yes,” Ania said. “We’d better get down there fast.”

“Agreed,” Cade said.

As Kyra joined them toward the exit she looked back out the viewport. In the darkness of night it was easy to see the flare of *Black Justice*’s thrusters as it dove toward the FSB building. Even more apparent was the hail of laserfire it spewed. That got the attention of the patrolling airspeeders like nothing else. The Mandalorian vessel juke and jumped to avoid retaliatory fire, then streaked away from the security zone taking a half-dozen chasing speeders with it.

“Okay, path’s clear!” Deliah shouted. “I’m bringing her in! Jariah, get the guns!”

“I always got the guns.” His eyes flicked past his shoulder to Kyra. “Better get down to the ramp, little *patogga*.”

She realized Ania and Cade had already gone ahead. *Mynock* accelerated and began rough maneuvers of its own, and Kyra found herself bouncing off bulkheads as she hurried down the corridor and down the stairs, through the crew lounge, all the way to *Mynock*’s main hold.

The ship kept trying to throw her off her feet and she made her way to the landing ramp. The broad doors were closed but Cade and Ania were standing right in front of them, as

well as Azlyn Rae and AG-37. R2-D2 was plugged into the ramp controls and released an eager whistle as Kyra joined them.

“Good, crew’s all here.” Cade flicked on his comlink. “Ready when you are, Blue!”

A few jerks later *Mynock* decelerated. Kyra grabbed right to the wall as the ship surged beneath her, adjusting altitude. With one more whistle, R2-D2 began lowering the ramp. The heavy metal door swung out and down and wind rushed their faces. *Mynock* had set down on a landing pad, broad and empty except for one security airspeeder and a handful of confused officers staring at the new arrival.

They didn’t stare long. AG-37 bounded down first, flicked both rifle-bearing arms out, and fired off five precise shots. By the time Kyra, Ania, Azlyn and Cade joined him on the deck the scampering officers were all prone on the deck.

AG-37 swung his top photoreceptor on the humans. “Landing zone secure. Expect reinforcements. We must move quickly.”

“Yeah, right.” Cade hefted a double-barrel blaster rifle in one hand, his lightsaber in the other. Kyra felt him reach into the Force with strength and ease she could only envy and he said, “I think I got her. Let’s go.”

Alarms were blaring now. Marin had progressed slowly through the facility, trying to blur every camera she spotted and taking out guards only if she couldn’t distract them with the Force. She must have missed something because the sirens were wailing, the sleepy facility was stirring, and she was about to have a lot more company.

Some of that company announced itself with a hail of laserfire over her head. Marin got a split-second warning through the Force and ducked. Then she turned around and saw three security officers charging down the hall behind her. She flicked out a short kinetic wave that hit them in the legs and sent them toppling over each other. She didn’t waste seconds pumping stun blasts into them; instead she ran.

Marin had gotten a chance to review a building schematic shortly after escaping her executioners. She’d found the right level to access the main landing pads but still had to get



through several long halls and a main, well-guarded foyer. Her rescuers were close; she could sense both of them in the Force and, she thought, maybe Ania too.

Scampering, body bent low, stolen rifle in either hand, Marin passed down two more corridors. She found the door she needed and found it locked, but a hard tug with the Force was enough to slide it partway open.

As soon as she slid through, she regretted it. A half-dozen stormtroopers were there, waiting for her with rifles lifted. The ones she'd fought with already had been using lethal bolts instead of stun blasts, and she doubted these would be different.

It looked like she'd met her firing squad after all.

Marin didn't lower her blasters. She felt her rescuers close and tried to drag the stand-off a little longer. "Let me through," she called, with a touch of Force suggestion.

"Drop the weapons," the lead trooper barked. "Do it now!"

"I'm not a threat to you."

She directed intention to the stormtrooper beside the leader. That soldier's gun wavered and he said aloud, "Boss, I don't think she'll hurt us."

"She's an escapee!" the leader snapped. "Shoot to kill!"

"Boss, I don't think that a good idea."

"Stang it, private, you're getting marks for insubordination! Everyone fire on my mark. Three! Two!"

That was when the door behind them cracked open and a tiny metal cylinder rolled into the room. Marin squeezed her eyes shut and ducked right as the flashbang went off. Her eyes were burned red and her ears rang; she barely heard the laserfire that filled the room. She didn't dare shoot her rifles and when a firm hand took her shoulder she let herself be pulled ahead. Marin stumbled over one prone body; boots hit hard stormtrooper armor and she almost fell.

She tried to use the Force to clear her ears and vision. When she opened her eyes the world was extra-bright and vivid, and she was in a hallway instead of the room with the troopers.

Her shoulder got another tug and a face bent close to hers. Ania. Her daughter broke and grin and said, "Nice job saving yourself. Now let's get our ride."

More blasterfire came from up ahead. Ania tugged Marin forward and together they came up behind a set of four figures shielding them in the hallway. One was her daughter's towering assassin droid protector. Another was a long-haired young woman; her lightsaber was red and the movements she used to deflect incoming laser blasts were haphazard and sloppy, but the Force flowed into her and out of her. Marin realized this was another of Ania's companions. She also marked Azlyn Rae by the back of her red head and the bulk of her breathing apparatus.

And finally, in the lead, was a man she'd never seen before. Stray laserfire poked holes in his longcoat and singed the curls of messy blond hair but he didn't flinch. With one hand he pumped shots from his double-barrelled blaster rifle. With the other he wielded a lightsaber like an expert, nimbly batting back shots. The man was all concentration and untamed will, and she knew this must be Cade Skywalker.

Cade led the charge, but AG-37 was right behind him. The tall assassin droid's aim could make a Force-user envious as he dropped stormtrooper after stormtrooper, clearing a path for them.

The six of them clambered over piled bodies and rushed through the next door. Suddenly they were in the building's large entry foyer, and laserfire immediately fell on them from multiple direction. Cade and AG-37 did their best to ward off shots while the four women darted for cover. The closest one was the base of an ornamental fountain on the right side of the lobby. Laserfire sizzled and smoked through leaping water over their heads as Cade and AG-37 rushed to join them.

Cade ducked low beside Ania, while AG-37 retracted legs into torso and tried to bend his long body forward. It was an awkward untenable posture that prevented him from shooting back, but Cade and Ania peeked over the fountain's rim and returned shots.

Marin peeked over too to get a quick look. Stormtroopers and officers had taken positions behind the security desk in the center of the room and behind the other fountain on the left side. More guarded the broad glass entrance doors through which a red old freighter could be seen waiting.

The moment they tried to move from the fountain they'd take shots from at least two directions. Marin calculated their options quickly and found no good ones.

"Hey, metalman, you got more flashbangs?" Cade asked.

"I have one more, but its efficacy is limited in an open space like this," AG-37 replied. He was ducking as much as possible but a few shots pinged off his back.

"We need to just pick a direction and run for it." The young woman, breathless with fear, clasped her red saber tight.

"I agree," Marin said and pointed to the balcony that ran over their heads. "Once they get troops up there, we'll lose our cover."

"Great." Cade scowled and peeked over the rim again. Ducking beneath a round of laserfire he said, "Can you lob that flashbang over the security desk? That'll take out some of 'em."

"I can try," said AG-37, "But it will take me point six-five seconds to stand, calculate the trajectory and launch. I will take damage in that time."

"Then I'll cover you. Stand up on three, okay?"

"Not okay," Azlyn said and waved her blaster at the balcony.

Over the high scream of laserfire they could hear the low pounding of feet. They were out of time. "Go now!" Marin barked and lifted both blasters to fire on the balcony.

Cade and AG-37 sprung upright. The man slashed his lightsaber, protecting the droid as he lobbed his last flash grenade. Even as Cade protected him from one side the soldiers on the balcony began pouring fire down, denting the droid's metal frame with a barrage of laserfire.

The grenade went off, blinding the ones at the security desk for a few precious seconds. Everyone rose and ran but Marin knew it wouldn't be enough. Fire was coming at them from three angles: the other fountain, the balcony, and the main doors. They'd never be able to defend themselves. They'd be lucky if any of them made it.

They had to try anyway. Marin and Ania vaulted over the fountain's rim and started to run. As soon as they did the broad front doors exploded inward, shattering glass across

the security officers stationed there and distracting the other gunmen.

Suddenly another form swept into the lobby. The woman was a constant swirl of red and black- Sith tattoos, Marin realized- and laserfire pumped continuously from either fist. Some of the shooters directed fire to the newcomer. Laser blasts pounded the Twi'lek's black armored vest, staggering her, but she didn't stop.

"Go go go!" Cade shouted as he barreled past Marin. AG-37, sparks flying from the damage he'd taken, pounded after him. Marin, Ania, and the other two women followed. The Twi'lek held at the smashed-open door, firing resolutely at the balcony's gunners even as more blasts scorched her bare shoulders and legs.

AG-37 was the first through the shattered threshold. The landing ramp was extended and waiting for them, and one dreadlocked man was on the slope, waving them forward. Azlyn and the girl raced ahead and Ania grabbed her mother's arm, pulling her forward.

As she hurried across the landing pad Marin looked over her shoulder to see Cade and the Twi'lek- the Sith- backing together out of the battle-scorched lobby. Then they, too, turned and ran for exit.

"Not that I don't appreciate the rescue," Cade said as they sprinted for the ramp, "But where the hells did *that* come from?"

Talon didn't answer right away. She jumped onto the metal slope; Cade landed right behind her. AG-37 and Jariah Syn fired over their heads, forcing the pursing stormtroopers to back off. As soon as everyone was on the ramp it started to pull upward and *Mynock* lifted off. Talon and Cade were both dumped onto the deck of the main hold as the ship started violent acceleration skyward.

As everyone panted for breath and checked their wounds, she formulated her answer. That successful fight had given Talon her first feeling of triumph in months, maybe since she'd lost the Force. It was more than worth risking her life for. But there was more than that.

Talon turned her eyes on the newcomer. It was an old woman with a lined back and gray hair pulled into a fraying bun. There was no obvious familiar resemblance to Cade Skywalker or Ania Solo, but her bond with them existed where it counted.

"You are a Skywalker," she said. Not a question.

The old woman inclined her head slightly. "I never thought of myself as one. But apparently I am."

"Then you hold the key to recovering the Force within you. Your rescue was necessary."

The old woman looked to Cade, who was struggled to his feet as his ship jerked and trembled. "We got a lot of catching up to do, Miss Whatever Your Name Is."

"Call me Marin," she said. "Just Marin."

An angry voice came over the hold's comm. "Jariah, get your butt up here and man the guns!"

"Got it," the man said, and scrambled for the cockpit. Cade followed but Talon was right behind him. She hadn't done all this to be shot out of the sky.

When he got to the cockpit Jariah dropped immediately into the co-pilot's chair and took weapon controls. *Mynock* shuddered faintly as he began popping off shots, and several whipped past the cockpit in reply. As Cade strapped himself into the seat behind the pilot he asked, "What are we looking at?"

"Bunch of TIEs trying to intercept." Deliah gritted her teeth as she threw the ship into tight evasive maneuvers. Overhead stars slipped back and forth in the viewport. "They probably buffed up security since the *last* ship busted out of here with a prisoner. Lucky us."

"Where's the bucket-boys?"

"Not far behind us. They're giving some cover fire."

"How long until we can get to lightspeed?"

"I don't know. Got a heading?"

"No, just get us out of here."

"Sounds good to me."

The ship shook violently from the impact on its shields. Talon half-sat and half-fell into the seat beside Cade's. He gave her a look that wavered between annoyance and

confusion; he was trying to figure out what to make of her after her last stunt but had more pressing concerns.

Deliah Blue was, to her credit, a good pilot, and she tossed *Mynock* through a series of evasive maneuvers. Jariah Syn was an equally good gunner, and even as the ship bounced around he managed to clear off most of the TIEs pursuing them. As they got to the edge of the gravity well a last batch of fighters tried to intercept them from the right flank, but *Black Justice* pulled ahead. The Mandalorian ship's heavy shields and heavier weapons easily broke the TIEs' charge, giving them the precious clearance they needed to jump to hyperspace.

Starlines became a bright white. Deliah exhaled and slumped in her seat. "Am I good or what?"

"The best, *meeshku*." Cade stood up, mussed her blue hair, and kissed her forehead. "Find some place to drop us out of lightspeed safely. Jariah, you call the bucket-boys and figure out a rendezvous point. Oh, and thank 'em for saving our butts. I'm gonna check on the new cargo."

As he started for the exit he gave Talon another of those weird, wondering looks. She stared blankly back. Her reasons for charging in there had been simple, she thought. She'd done what she had because it was the only thing left she could do. If Skywalker couldn't understand, that was his problem.

Before he left the cockpit, Jariah said, "Hey, looks like we picked up a message."

"Message from who?" asked Deliah.

"Looks like *Free Agent*." Jariah tapped the comm console.

The message was voice-only and Jao Assam sounded tense with urgency. "*Mynock*, I hope you get this and I hope you get off Coruscant in one piece. We've just gotten a message from Anj Dahl of Rogue Squadron, who I guess you've been working with."

"Lovely lady," Jariah muttered fondly.

"She says the Alliance fleet under Admiral Bey had been besieged by Hogrum Chalk's forces. They're walled in by a set of Hapan gravity well mines but Dahl has blown a hole in the wall. She's trying to get people out from the siege but she needs help." Jao swallowed audibly. "It sounds like they're

being set up for the slaughter. The *empress* is with that fleet. We should help any way we can. Dahl sent coordinates where we can slip through the minefield. When you get this message, *please* let me know.”

His voice clicked off. Deliah sighed and lumped deeper in her seat. “I’m getting damn sick of rescue missions. We should start charging for this.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jariah shook his head and look to Cade. “What do you think, *pateesa*? Out of the fryer, into the fire?”

“Story of my karking life,” Cade said. “But you heard the man. Let’s get going.”

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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In her dream, Marasiah was lost in a maze of corridors. She didn't recognize the building but something in its stark splendor brought to mind the Bastion palace of her childhood. The pathway wound sharp corners and sometimes broke into branches, and no matter which route she tried she was always walled in by hard stone. There were no doors, not even locked ones. Eventually there seemed no point in wandering and she simply stopped where she was.

That was when alarms woke her. Empty hallways faded to black, which in turn was replaced by blurry white. When vision cleared she realized she was lying on her stomach, head braced past the operating table's edge and staring at clean floor-tile. Feet skirted around her and she heard voices, muffled, incomprehensible, but she sensed panic.

With effort, Marasiah found her arms, found strength, and pushed herself off the table. As she struggled to sit upright a medical droid's hollow voice said, "Please do not strain yourself, mistress. There is no reason to hurry."

She wasn't sure about that. As soon as Marasiah threw her legs over the table's edge and sat upright, the Drallian doctor scurried to her side. "Empress, please be calm."

"What's going on? Why are there alarms?"

He took a deep breath. "We are under attack, Majesty. The entire fleet has been surrounded by star destroyers."

"What?" She jumped off the table. As her bare feet smacked the floor a sharp pain stabbed through her lower



back. She lurched against the table and remembered the operation she'd been through.

"We have sealed the insertion and applied bacta but your muscles and skin will take time to fully mend," the doctor cautioned.

"What is going *on*? How are we under attack?"

The Drall's little mouth stuttered. He knew what to say but was afraid to get it out. From behind her a familiar voice said, "You were implanted with a tracking device. That's how they found us."

Marasiah spun. Ganner looked baleful in the operating table's bright lights. Her hand went to the small of her back, where fingers touched lightly over the sensitive wound.

"I'm so sorry," Ganner said. "We had no idea. The device... it was sophisticated and designed to escape detection."

Marasiah grew dizzy. Her legs buckled and Ganner was immediately beside her, holding her up by both shoulders. She'd never imagined she could be so utterly outplayed. Bile surged in her empty stomach and she felt ready to vomit. She swallowed the burn and forced herself to look at him.

"Get me a comm," she whispered. "I need to talk to my uncle, or whoever's commanding that fleet. I'll tell him I surrender."

Ganner shook his head. "Master Sinde's up on the bridge now. He says we can't make any contact with the fleet. They're aggressively jamming all our signals. They've also thrown up a blockade of Hapan pulse mass mines to prevent our escape." He swallowed hard. "I think they've pinned us down for a slaughter."

She almost fainted again. Her mind screamed denial. "No. There was to be a way... My uncle... I'll give myself up. I'll let him kill me..."

"Empress... I think he means to kill all of us."

Marasiah looked down at the clothes she'd had the surgery in. Loose, lightweight. White pajamas, like the ones she'd been imprisoned in. She thought she's escaped but she'd taken her cage with her, and she'd dragged hundreds of thousands of brave Alliance soldiers into it without even knowing.

She squeezed Ganner's arm like it was the last sure thing in the universe. "You should have never come for me. You should have left me in the jail forever."

His pain bled into the Force. He wanted to argue with her but couldn't.

"Ganner... what do we do?" Her voice was small, weak, not like an empress at all.

"We'll call Master Sinde on the bridge. They're trying to punch through the interdiction field. If we can just knock out one of their drag ships some of us might get away."

The medical center rocked slightly around them, the first sign *Alliance* had come under heavy fire. Ganner pressed, "We can get you to a ship. Punch you through the gap even if *Alliance* can't make it through. We *will* get you out of here, Majesty, I swear it."

Conviction burned in his eyes and scraped his throat. Marasiah only nodded. Ganner wanted her to live more than she did herself.

Emerald laserfire was falling into *Alliance's* forward shields and ripples of energy scatter periodically obscured the view from the bridge. Worse were the arcs of concussion missiles from the smaller star destroyer directly above them, which was firing with all ventral launchers and overwhelming the particle shields. Warheads slipped past the screen and impacted far down the hull, tearing fiery holes in the flagship's bow even as it pushed toward a second destroyer that had turned its broadside to intercept their forward charge.

The attacking ships had fallen on them with a vengeful frenzy, and stuck on the bridge Treis Sinde had felt the ache of helplessness every time one of Bey's corvettes or frigates disappeared in a burst of flame. The dire situation was getting worse by the minute but the admiral himself seemed almost calm as he strode up and down the bridge, giving commands to increasingly frantic crew.

Treis admired his apparent composure. The *Alliance* fleet had essentially split into halves, one attacking the interdicator cruiser at the north end of the battle zone, with a smaller group attacking the one to the south. *Alliance* and a small

collection of support ships were separate from either group and vectoring toward a jump point that would supposedly carry them through the wall of Hapan mines laid outside the battle zone. *Alliance* was the most powerful ship in this brawl, but it was currently being pounded by two *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers with more on the way.

Even if they did break past their immediate attackers, it would do no good if that interdiction field remained. Treis watched on the holo as the marker for another Mon Cal ship winked out high above them. The Imperials were throwing almost everything into the defense of the drag ships. The lead Alliance vessel attacking the north point had been savaged pounded and was now adrift in space. Its support ships were still attacking but a half-dozen big destroyers had formed a protective wall around the interdictor.

Things were faring only a little better on the south end of the fight. Though the brawl there wasn't as fierce, a pair of destroyers were holding back the cruiser *Enduring Pride*. Meanwhile *Mon Elusia*, already badly damaged from the fight at Coruscant, had lurched to join the battle, but instead of risking a direct fight it was in no shape to win, it had emptied its bays of all smaller ships. Not just starfighters, but shuttles and every manned or support craft had been jettisoned into space. The only thing it hadn't cast away was the escape pods, and those only because they lacked weapons. The fight at the south pole seemed in no better shape than the north's, and Treis had no idea how Bey hoped to salvage any of it. Nonetheless the admiral stalked the bridge, showing off strength even if he didn't feel it.

As he watched the tactical holo he felt the buzz of her personal comlink. Only Ganner and Marasiah had access to it, and he quickly stepped off the bridge and turned it on.

"This is Sinde," he said, "Report."

"It's me, Master Sinde." Marasiah's voice was heavy, killing his joy at hearing it.

"I'm glad to hear you're awake."

"You shouldn't be. The implant was a tracer."

"I know. Ganner told me."

"He *used* me." Her voice went thick with bile. "I've led all these people to their deaths. *All* of them!"

Before she cracked further Ganner said, "We still have a chance to get out of this, Empress. Please, be patient."

It was as much a plea as assurance. "I'll tell the admiral you're awake and ask his advice," Treis said. "Empress, are you ready to evacuate this ship if need be?"

"I can move," she said.

"I've been studying the ship's schematics," Ganner added. "There are several private docking bays on this ship, and if the admiral will direct us to them--"

"I think the admiral is still hoping to get *all* this ship through the fight intact," Treis said, though as another shudder rocked the ship he struggled to think of how. "Stand by. I'll talk to him immediately."

He pocketed the comlink and walked back onto the bridge. Bey was at the tactical station, giving orders while Senator Derrol watched the holo anxiously. Before Treis could all his attention, the admiral hurried toward the comm station.

"Admiral, sir!" Treis trotted after him. "Good news. The empress is awake and awaiting instructions."

The Weequay glanced over his shoulder. "I wasn't aware she took them."

"This is your ship." He stepped close and lowered his voice. "Should we prepare to evacuate?"

His leathery face wrinkled. "I'm hoping to avoid that, but she should be ready. I was about to order all non-combat staff to begin preparations."

"I understand. But that drag field--"

Bey held up a hand. "Just watch, Master Sinde. You're about to understand." He turned to the comm station and said, "Get me a priority link with Captain Errangar. Now."

A few seconds later the holo-image of a fierce-looking Shistavenen appeared before him. *Mon Elusia's* captain snapped a quick salute. "Your orders, Admiral?"

"Have you completed evacuation?"

"All ships have launched. Our bays are totally empty. We have staff standing by inside the escape pods."

"Don't launch them yet. You'll give our intentions away. Break at maximum speed for that interdictor. Captain Grevark will run interference for you the best he can. Once you think you have a clear shot at the drag ship, you can

launch the escape pods. Given the Imperials' moods I can't promise anyone inside them will survive..."

"It will give them some chance," Errangar said.

"Yes. Launch them at your discretion."

"I intend to. I'll stay on the bridge and see this through to the end."

Treis understood what they planned, and what Errangar meant. Bey nodded firmly. "We'll never forget what you've done here, Captain."

"I hope you last to remember it."

The Shistavenen snapped another salute. Bey returned it. Their two men's gazes held through the flickering transmission, and then the holo winked out.

Bey relaxed his salute, sighed, and turned to Treis. "You know what's about to happen. We have one shot at escape and I will press forward as hard as I can."

"I see now. Thank you, Admiral, for giving us a fighting chance."

"I've done what I could. Now go down to sick bay, retrieve your empress, and get her ready to move." He glanced at the tactical station and raised his voice. "You too, Senator. You're not doing any good up here."

Derrol seemed to rankle. "I don't want to run from a fight."

"This isn't yours to win. Get down to sick bay and protect your wife."

The senator nodded reluctantly and started for the exit. Treis fell stride-matching-stride beside him. "The admiral's right," he said, "We're most useful elsewhere."

"I know." Derrol growled frustration. "Stay with me, Master Sinde. I know the quickest way to the medcenter. This ship was my home for a long time, you know."

His voice was tinged with sadness and uncertainty. He was wondering if his home would become his grave.

Rogue Two's Crossfire twisted around a volley of laserfire, then straightened long enough for Anj to drop behind the TIE Predator shooting at him and deliver hot light of her own. The TIE attempted to wrestle away but a single proton torpedo caught it from behind, punched through faltering shields, and turned it to spiraling flame.

“Thanks Lead,” Rogue Two called. “I owe you again.”

“Plenty of chances to repay,” Anj called, “Start hunting.”

She tried to keep up some banter but it was hard. After making an emergency call to *Free Agent* and breaking a small hole in the minefield, the Rogues had jumped in to find a brutal battle already joined. The massive fleet of star destroyers seemed intent on total slaughter, like they were trying to silence anyone who had any clue that the empress had survived. That would explain why the Imperial ships were putting out a broad jamming field and refusing to respond to hails from the Alliance ships, even offers of surrender. Anj had no idea Hogrum Chalk could be this ruthless.

Admiral Bey was busy trying to find an escape from this massacre and he’d spared only a few words of instruction for his old wingmate, but that was enough. Though there was a huge brawl to defeat the interdicator cruiser holding at the battle zone’s north pole, Jhoram had assured her that the southern pole was where the fight would really be decided. Though *Alliance* was making a violent push toward the exit vector even now, he’d told Anj to protect *Mon Elusia* at all costs.

The mighty Mon Cal cruiser had been savaged by the fight over Coruscant and had avoided most of the battle so far, preferring instead to empty all its hangar bays. Anj failed to see a method to the madness until Captain Errangar’s ship made a lurching pivot, then fired engines to full and threw its big, battered body toward the south-point interdicator.

The two star destroyers defending the drag ship were currently entangled with Captain Grevark’s *Enduring Pride*. The Alliance warship had engaged its counterparts so heavily that they didn’t even notice *Mon Elusia*’s charge until it was past their firing range.

The drag ship still had other defenders. TIEs starting swarming *Mon Elusia*, pecking away at unshielded portions of its hull. The Rogues joined dozens of other Alliance fighters trying to keep the big ship clear. It was drawing into firing range now and the interdicator had turned its broadside to pummel *Mon Elusia*’s already-torn-up nose. As Anj chased down two TIE Neutralizers on a bombing run, she

saw a chain of explosions rip through the hull, spilling debris into space.

The ship wouldn't last long, and by now everybody had figured out that Captain Errangar was on a suicide run. Anj picked out one Neutralizer and pooped a torpedo through its shields. Rogue Two, right on her wing, launched a second warhead that destroyed the other bomber.

They'd just bought *Mon Elusia* a few seconds more life. Anj hoped it counted.

She called Rogues Three and Four to join Two on her wing- miraculously they'd all survived- then spun her Crossfire around for another pass. As the Mon Cal cruiser came into view she saw the interdicator looming right ahead of it, firing frantically as it tried to break and run. Those gravity wells drew a lot of power, making the ship slower than vessels of comparable size, with less armor and weapons. *Mon Elusia* was half aflame, and from that angle it looked like the bridge's blister might have already been hit, but the Mon Cal cruiser plunged ahead.

Anj watched as escape pods began shooting out of its hull. She didn't know if the wait awaiting those crew was death or something even worse, but she told her pilots, "All Rogues, protect the pods! Shoot down any Imps that gets close!"

Her pilots did just that, dropping behind *Mon Elusia* as it made its final surge. Anj felt a sick twist as she saw a few pods take green laser blasts and burst into flame.

"The rodders are shooting them down!" Rogue Four snarled. "They're blowing up escape pods!"

"Not if we can help it," Anj said, "Take them down!"

The Rogues threw themselves into a counterattack, chasing down and destroying any TIE that dared get near the pods. She'd only seen fighting this savage during the last days of the war against Krayt, when the Sith fleets knew the tide was turning and were trying to do as much damage as possible before losing. This was worse; Chalk's forces had the upper hand, knew it, and were mercilessly squashing every opponent, even those who couldn't defend themselves.

Anj destroyed another TIE Predator with a flush of satisfaction when she heard Rogue Three gasp, "Look!"

She knew exactly where to gaze. Anj twisted her fighter

and peered through the viewport as *Mon Elusia* rammed the interdicator cruiser at best speed. Even with large chunks of superstructure burned away it still easily outmassed the drag ship, and like a battering ram it seemed to snap the wedge-shaped vessel in half. The resulting explosion was blinding, but Anj squinted through to watch the fireball chase up *Mon Elusia* from nose to stern. Flames burned out slowly as massive chunks of debris drifted through space: the drag ship's pointed nose, a slice of its bridge tower, *Mon Elusia*'s rear half. Everything forward of the bridge had been shattered and everything behind it was dark except for flames eating up residual atmosphere.

It was a staggering sight. A few pilots cheered. Most were quietly reverent.

Then a call came from *Alliance*. It was Admiral Bey himself. "Anj!" he called. "Do you hear me, Rogue Leader?"

"Loud and clear, Rogue Leader," she replied. "Drag ship's down."

"We see that. Your exit vector's open but it might not last long. They'll move the other drag ship deeper into the battle zone to compensate. Captain Hollux will hold them as long as he can but his ships can barely fight."

"Understood. Are you making a run for it?"

"We're pressing now. Take charge of all fighters from *Mon Elusia* and join us. I'll tell Grevark to bug out too, if he can."

Anj twisted her fighter and spotted *Enduring Pride* squeezed between two destroyers. She doubted it would last long. "Sir, *Mon Elusia* pumped out a lot of escape pods. The Imps are destroying them."

"I'm sorry, Anj, but *Alliance* takes priority. We still have the empress aboard."

She understood. "We're on our way. Good luck, Rogue Leader."

"You too, Rogue Leader."

She cut her connected and relayed Jhoram's order to all nearby ships. Despite signs of reluctance they obeyed and formed up behind her, a massive wave of nearly fifty snubfighters on course for *Alliance*.

It was clear the flagship needed help. Two Imperial destroyers were pounding it as it tried to slip past. The



destroyer directly beneath it had taken heavy damage but the one above was hitting it with a thick rain of green turbolaserfire. There wasn't much even fifty Crossfires could do against that, but they could at least keep the other parts of *Alliance* clear from TIE attacks.

"Okay, Rogues on me, we're cutting aft of *Alliance*," she ordered. "I want all squads from *Mon Elusia* to—"

A bright flare cut her off. *Alliance* was still dozens of kilometers away but she could see, with clear eyes, as a volley of missiles joined the turbolaser rain and broke through the flagship's dorsal shields. Geysers of flame erupted in the middle of its spine. The attacking destroyer kept pounding away, and Anj could only watch as a second missile barrage fell onto *Alliance*'s command tower.

All shields had failed. There was nothing to defend the bridge, and it vanished in fireball.

Anj gasped. A few other pilots cursed but she couldn't even find those words. More laserfire fell on *Alliance* and its engines sputtered and died. The great flagship of the Galactic Alliance navy, the one they'd sacrificed so much to gain, began to drift through space. Its interior lights started winking out but new lights, firelights, sprung up in its place.

All through this fight Anj had clung to the desperate, stupid, necessary belief that they'd come out of this close call like they'd come out of so many before. That bravado and belief would keep the Alliance dream alive.

It wasn't true. And her mind just couldn't accept it.

"Boss," Rogue Three said, "That exit vector's still open, but not for long. The other drag ship's moving to cover it."

As Anj watched, escape pods began to flee from *Alliance*'s hull. Shuttlecraft jumped out of its hangars. She managed to say, "All Rogues, broadcast exit coordinates to those ships. Tell them where to run."

"Are we running, Lead?" Rogue Six asked nervously.

Part of her wanted to; part of her wanted to fight and die bravely like Jhoram and Errangar, Grevark and Antilles and Hollux and so many more.

"Protect those shuttles," she evaded, and pushed her Crossfire ahead.

By the time they reached *Alliance*, the big Imperial destroyer had stopped bombarding its corpse was pulling up to deal with the remains of Hollux's task force. There were still TIEs aplenty, destroying helpless escape pods and chasing shuttles. It twisted Anj's gut but there was nothing they could do for the pods, and she ordered all pilots to protect the fleeing shuttles.

The small ships began winking to lightspeed through the hole the Rogues had carved. They were fleeing to get away, not to reach any one destination. What was left of Jhoram's renegade fleet would scatter and be hunted, having been successful cast in the public's eye as a band of terrorists who'd bombarded Galactic City. Anj couldn't imagine what Admiral Slossar would do, what he *could* do.

Whether the empress was on one of those shuttles didn't matter. They'd lost.

More shuttles escaped. *Mon Elusia*'s flight leader hailed her, urgently saying that the second drag ship was moving into position and their window was closing. Should they flee?

She wanted to tell him it didn't matter. They'd lost. But when she thought on poor Jhoram she thought on how he'd bravely defied surrender orders at Bakura. And that made her think of Gar Stazi, who'd fled Caamas with his tiny scrap of fleet when the rest of the Alliance navy surrendered or died.

Jhoram had fled with a smaller fleet than Stazi, and what she had now was smaller than any of them. But it was something. Not big enough to win a war or even a skirmish, but enough to keep the truth alive.

And the truth of this awful day had to be told, somehow.

Mouth dry, Anj switched her comm to its broadest frequency and said, "All ships, if you can, jump to hyperspace now. I'll see you on the other side."

And without a word in response, the last shuttles and snubfighters oriented toward the exit vector and slipped into hyperspace, one after another after another. Anj was the last of them. She looked at her sensors and saw all they'd left behind: the dying body of *Alliance*, the wreckage of *Mon Elusia*, the doomed escape pods and strewn debris of the Galactic Alliance's last proud fleet.

With tears in her eyes, Anj fired her hyperdrive and spiraled away from it all.

They'd barely gotten out of the med ward when *Alliance* shook so violently it threw them off their feet and dashed medical equipment across the floor behind them. Ganner was right next to the empress and even as his shoulder slammed into the bulkhead he grabbed Marasiah to keep her upright.

The hallway outside the med ward had become crowded with people. Not only Ganner and the empress but the doctors and the walking wounding, including Senator Derrol's wife, had gathered things as quickly as they could to get to an evacuation ship. Many of them, Marasiah and Saarai included, were still dressed in loose white shifts.

After the ship shuddered they tried to press on, though the group shambled so slowly through the corridor Ganner was tempted to grab the empress and rush ahead. They got barely fifty meters when the ship trembled again, throwing them not walls. This time a long groan sounded above them, muffled by layers of decks but still awful. Then the lights flickered, shuddered back on for five seconds, and died.

The pure-black hall was fill with sounds of panic. Ganner found his lightsaber, held it out to where he hoped no one was standing, and turned it on. The white blade provided some illumination but nothing as good as a glowlamp. Behind him, two doctors flicked on their own focused light-beams that projected onto the hallway ahead.

"You two, come up front," Ganner waved them. "Get up here. Show us the way."

One of the doctors, a human no older than Ganner, said, "We don't know how badly the ship's been hit. We need to check with the bridge."

"If they can hear us," someone in the back muttered.

The doctor brought out his comlink with his free hand. He cycled through several channels but got no response.

"This is bad," the man paled. "I'm getting nothing. I think internal comms are down."

Ganner had a solution for that. He pulled out his personal link and tried to hail Treis Sinde directly. For a long moment there was no response, and he saw Marasiah tense with fear.

Then the older Knight's voice, weary but welcome, said, "Master Krieg, what's your status?"

"Not good. We're still by the medcenter. Central comms are down. Lights are down. I'm not sure about life support. Where are you?"

Treis hesitated, then said, "Hold on. My companion knows better than I do."

The comlink shifted audibly to another palm, and a deep voice said, "We are in Section C, Deck Twenty-Seven. The medical ward is in Section H, Deck Eighteen."

"Porat!" Saarai brightened at his voice and shifted close to Ganner. "Porat, what happened? Did you leave the bridge?"

"Yes. I think... I think the bridge has been destroyed."

The darkness of the hall became even more grim. Ganner asked, "Is the ship still under attack?"

"I think so. We're still hearing tremors from the higher decks. Power is down here too. It may be out all over the ship. I.... don't know how much time we have."

"We need to do *something*," Ganner said. He hadn't come this far, done this much, to suffocate in the dark. "How can we get to that private docking bay you were talking about?"

"There's a bay in Section E, Deck Five, Subsection Grek. I know a way *we* can get there. But you..." Derrol sucked in breath, thinking hard. "I may know a way. Keep going until you get to Section F, then find the turbolift shaft and ride it to Deck Eight. From there, you can take an auxiliary passage to Section E and the hangar."

"What if power's down in Section F too?"

"I don't know." His voice dropped. "If the main reactors are down, some subsidiary reactors may kick in. But those might drain energy from internal gravity."

"So we may less drop down that tube than float down?"

"Precisely. Let us know when you reach that section."

"Understood. We'll talk again." Ganner turned off the comm and looked the mass of frightened people behind him, half-visible in the dark. He glanced at Marasiah who seemed to be staring into the black, lost and not helpful at all.

To his surprise it was Saarai who raised her voice. "We need to get all the way to Section F. I'm sure the doctors know the way. We have a clear path but we have to move

quickly before life support shuts down. We can do this, but we have to *move*.”

She could orate almost as well as her husband. She started ahead first; the doctors with glowlamps followed her and the rest of the crowd surged behind them. Ganner started, noticed Marasiah was still stuck in place, then gently reached out and took her arm. He gave her a tug and she started forward, unhurried, like one condemned.

In their haste to escape *Alliance*, Treis and Derrol found themselves swept into a chaotic stream. The ship’s crew was frantic to escape and they crammed into the dark halls, pushing and half-trampling each other as they tried to reach the hangar and the escape pods. Some people were shouting the escape pods weren’t safe and that the Imperials were shooting them as they drifted helpless in space, but the rest refused to believe it and pushed on.

All the while, the upper decks shuddered as turbolaserfire pounded the star destroyer’s dorsal side and vibrations tremored through bulkheads all the way to their position near the craft’s underbelly. The impacts seemed less frequent to Treis, but he couldn’t be sure of that or anything as he was shoved and jostled by the crowd. His only guidance was Senator Derrol’s two tall, proud Chagrian horns, which rose so high they nearly scraped the ceiling.

When they reached Section D power was on, the halls were brighter, and the barely-audibly hum of the climate control units in the ceiling reminded Treis of what he’d been missing. With good air the scene felt more stable and he had an easier time as the senator led him unerringly through the halls, slipping away from the big crowds trying to make their way to the hangar. Treis was starting to doubt whether there’d be any ships left by the time they met the empress there.

Abruptly, Derrol made a sideways turn and Treis followed. The nook, set off from the main hall and flow of people, contained nothing except a computer access terminal.

Derrol was already working its keypad and leaning close to the two-dimensional screen. Treis peered past his shoulder as the senator brought up a schematic of *Alliance*. The map was only a partial one: large chunks of the superstructure had

been blocked off in alarming, solid red, with no further detail available. Most of those decks were concentrated on the ship's topside, and included the entire command section.

"Are those parts.... Gone?" he asked Derrol.

"The central computer's lost all communication with them. Even backup power is gone. We have to assume those sections have either been destroyed or opened to the void." Derrol zoomed in on the destroyer's underside. Tapping the screen he said, "We're at this point. The medical center is here and the hangar is here."

Treis didn't like the blacked-out zone between the hangar and the medical bay. "What does that mean? Power's down?"

"And internal gravity. And life support. It's out for all of Sections F and G."

"Then they're in the middle of it now," Treis said and took out his comm.

"Right now the computer says those sections are secure. That means bulkheads and environmental integrity are holding, but there's no telling what--"

The ship rocked violently, knocking Treis into Derrol and Derrol into a wall. The lights flickered and stayed on but a deep groaning sound reverberated through the hall. Vibration crept up Treis' feet and rattled his jaw; the horrible movement lasted a full minute before stopping.

Treis looked at the lights. "Still on. That's good, isn't it?"

"No. It's not." Derrol's voice had gone cold. He pointed to the computer display, which had updated the destroyer's schematic. A great red wound had been opened in the lower portion of Section D, and those decks had been blocked out with pure red. The section they were in was flashing yellow and red.

"What does that mean?" asked Treis.

"There's been a major hull breach. Parts of this section are venting atmosphere."

"But it's just the lower decks!"

Derrol shook his head. "This ship is designed to seal off one section at a time. There are heavy bulkheads between each one that lower in case of catastrophic decompression. Other doors and decks seal too, but..." He tapped the divider

between Section D and their destination in Section E. "What's left of the ship's computer recognized that decompression in this section. It's lowered bulkheads and sealed us off from Section E."

"Are you sure this is accurate? You said yourself everything's unreliable."

"I know," Derrol snarled. "I don't *want* it to be true. Saaraï and the empress might get to the hangar, assuming there's still any ships left to take. *We* can't. Our best bet is to find the escape pods."

"They're shooting down the escape pods."

The senator flinched. "You don't know that."

Treis knew it. Grimly, horribly, he knew it, because he could see it all. The Hogrum Chalk who'd betrayed his emperor to Morlish Veed and quietly plotted Roan's downfall was capable of anything. He could fake his own niece's murder and depose her. He could bait Alliance die-hards into attacking Stazi's trial. He could plant a tracker inside Marasiah and follow her back to Bey's renegade fleet. He could entrap that fleet, surround it, and slaughter every last helpless man and woman who might reveal any of his machinations, including his own niece.

Treis had known that man for forty years and never known him at all. The realization crushed him inside, but it made his decision simpler too.

"The escape pods aren't an option," he said. "We need to guide the empress and your wife to a *real* escape. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said Derrol. He knew what it might cost them. Despite whatever hidden secret had caused Marasiah to distrust him, he was a brave man.

"Are there more computer terminals like this one the way to Section E?"

"I believe I can find some."

"Good. We may need to check one again. For now we'll make our way to that sealed bulkhead and hope we still have air left by the time we get there." Treis patted his lightsaber. "You lead the way. I'll call our friends. Let's get moving."

Lights and power were down. Artificial gravity was down. Life support was probably down too; Saaraï was starting to

feel lightheaded but she wasn't sure if it was oxygen deprivation of stress. The one good of it all was that it was easy to pass through the lift tube to Deck 8 in Section F. Once Ganner carved through the tube's sealed door with his lightsaber- she'd forgotten how handy those were- they pushed their weightless bodies through the passage.

Before getting this far they'd gotten another call from Porat. He'd said they were in Section D and making progress to Section E, that the power here was online and that Section E seemed to remain under power too. She'd detected an undercurrent of stress to his voice that belied his confidence, but she trusted him implicitly. The trembling through the ship seemed to have stopped, and she wondered if Chalk's destroyers hadn't pulled away from *Alliance's* corpse to finish off still-living prey.

As they drifted through the tube one of the doctors flashed his glowlamp on the deck numbers dented in relief against the frame of each sealed doorway. As his light shined on the number 10 he announced, "Just two more decks to go."

"Good," Ganner breathed, "Once we get out, we should call our friends and check their progress."

"Agreed," Saarai said. She clutched the Knight's comm tight in her fist. It was her last, only link to her husband. "They should be in Section E by now."

Behind them, in the dark, the empress said, "If there were ships in that hangar they've probably been taken by now."

Ganner tilted his lightsaber toward the voice. Dim white light showed Marasiah Fel's blank face. "We don't know that. The senator said it was a secure deck."

"And people will abandon ship any way they can. And they'd go for a ship before they go for an escape pod. The ship is their own chance at freedom."

It was logical, and probably correct, but not what they needed to hear right now. Saarai was surprised; even when training as a Sith she'd been told the Imperial princess had strong will and commanding presence. The woman before her seemed shrunken and lost, not regal at all.

"We'll deal with that when we get there," Ganner said as they drifted to Deck Eight's door. "If worse comes to worst we can always take escape pods."



“That will just get us captured,” said Saarai.

“At least they have working oxygen refreshers.” Ganner looked around the dark tube. “Can’t you feel it? Air’s getting a little thinner. I don’t think there’s a hull breach in this section, though. Otherwise we’d be even worse off.”

Another thing they didn’t need to hear now. Saarai grabbed hold of the tube’s side with her new metal arm and swung herself toward the door. “We’re *here*, Master Krieg. Put that lightsaber to work.”

The Knight nodded and tipped his lightsaber to the sealed metal. Before he could plunge it through the two doors grinded apart, revealing the black corridor beyond.

Saarai looked back to the empress and realized she’d used the Force. Impatiently Marasiah Fel said, “Let’s go. We don’t have time to waste.”

The reinforced, vacuum-sealed door at the end of the hallway was like a promise fulfilled. As Treis and Derrol started for it the overhead lights shuddered and the door strobed white and black. The oxygen was thinning in this section, he was sure of it. Power was unreliable and he’d had to use his lightsaber to cleave through a few doors, including the one right behind him, which probably helped thin it further.

But the heavy door sealing off Section E was the end of that. They’d checked the last working computer terminal they’d found several decks back and it had reported Section E was still fully sealed and fully operable. Beyond that door was fresh oxygen and, if the Force was with them, their friends and a ship.

Right now Treis would settle for good air. His steps were stumbling as he shouldered past Derrol and made for the end of the hall. Concentrating to make sure he did it right, he took his lightsaber off his belt, thumbed the ignition trigger, and pointed the pure-white blade forward. Its modest glow chased back the flickering dark and filled him with new hope.

He braced one hand against the armored door and angled his blade to stab straight through. Before plunging he looked back at Derrol. “Ready?”

“Do it,” the senator said.

Treis did it. He plunged his superheated blade into the melted, liquifying it and tracing a molten circle big enough to crawl through. When he finally completed the circle and withdrew his saber he heard the whistle of air through the minute cracks. It was like sweet music and he took a step back, half-expecting and even hoping the greater pressure from the other side would push the cut-out portion of the door free. Apparently it was too heavy for that, so Treis waved Derrol forward. Together, bracing themselves against opposite walls, the men reared back and kicked one foot each into the circle, tearing the metal free and knocking it into the corridor beyond.

The other side was total black, save the light from their end that flickered through. That was when Treis realized they were in trouble, but the full terror didn't take him until he realized the air from their side was gushing to fill the gap in the one beyond.

The computer had been wrong. Section E had lost power, hull integrity, and oxygen. From the fast howl of the wind as it rushed out of their corridor, most of it must have already been opened to the vacuum.

Treis and Derrol both turned to run, but the end of the hallway was so distant and Treis had carved through that door too. The door past that one must have been fifty meters away and the air was thinning fast. They'd never make it. Derrol tried anyway. He staggered away from the hole they'd carved, sucking wind in his face, one deliberate step after another until he pitched to his knees, exhausted, too weak to go on.

Fearful but lightheaded, Treis felt that he would have picked a number of other people to die with. But nobody had ever promised him a choice.

His chest tightened as it gasped for air he didn't have. Treis fell back to the wall and let himself slump. Death crowded him but he remembered duty. The empress. He had to warn Marasiah. He found his comlink and thumbed it on. "Ganner? Sia? Are you there?"

"Master Sinde?" It was the senator's wife. "Is Porat with you?"

"He's here." Treis looked down the hall. Derrol had

surrendered; he was on hands and knees, crawling back, lured by the sound of his wife.

"Where are you now? Have you reached Section E?"

"There is no Section E... I'm... so sorry..."

"What do you mean?" Ganner's voice said. "Where are you now?"

"Section E. There's... no air here... The whole section's... no good."

"Master Sinde! You have to get out of there!"

"It's... too late, Ganner. Where are you?"

"Section F. We were almost at Section E, but..."

"Stay there."

"There's no gravity here! No power. All we have is the air that's left..." His voice faltered and became small. He had no idea what to do.

"We can still get in the escape pods," Saara said. "All of you can! Porat! If you get moving--"

"Stay out of the pods," Treis warned. "They're being... fired on."

"That's insane!" an unfamiliar voice said. "It's a warm crime!"

"It's exactly what my uncle would do," another one croaked. Were it not for the words, Treis wouldn't have recognized it as Marasiah's.

His vision was starting to darken and blur. Speaking was hard. Derrol had crawled up next to him. He'd want to talk to his wife before the end but Treis had words of his own to say.

"Siah... I'm so sorry..." he gasped, "I tried... protect you..."

"I know, Master Sinde."

"You were like... family to me..."

"I know. You *are* family." Marasiah tried so hard to assure, but her voice trembled. "Master Sinde... Thank you for everything."

The words gave him some warmth. Good to end it there, he thought dimly. Imperial Knights put too much value on restraint. Sometimes truth needed to be said. Sometimes you needed to hear it.

He let his hand fall to his side. The comlink clicked against the deck and Derrol reached out and took it.

“Saarai...” the senator rasped, “Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you, Porat.” Her voice was choked.

“It’s all right. Shhh... I... I’m so proud of you... No matter what you’ve done... in the past....”

“Porat, I-”

“The woman you are now... I love...”

Derrol struggled to get out every word. Maybe there was more. Treis couldn’t tell. The howl of wind had ceased and the hallway had emptied of air. His chest had stopped heaving for salvation that wouldn’t come. His body felt heavy and light at the same time. He couldn’t move any of it. He let his head loll to one side and let his eyes flutter shut, like he was being carried away to a long-expected sleep.

Floating in the dark hallway, lit by a pair of stark glowlamps and the reflected white of Ganner’s lightsaber, Marasiah watched with curious detachment as Saarai Derrol’s body curled tight, knees retracting to chest, hands clasped in front of her lips as she shouted her husband’s name into the dead comlink. The rest of those in the hall- the doctors, the patients, even Ganner- averted their eyes. Marasiah was the only one who watched Saarai retch and shout in grief. There was no point in looking away. She could feel it all in the Force.

Saarai’s pain was a strange counterpoint to the hollowness Marasiah felt inside. Treis Sinde’s death should have meant something. The man had been her father’s closest confidant, her best teacher, the Knight’s moral compass. He’d been far, far better to her than her blood family had ever been.

It was a tragedy, but the day was full of them. They were countless and all of them were because of her.

Marasiah didn’t so much reach for the Force as she allowed herself to drift into it. She looked beyond the bright flare of Saarai’s grief and found Ganner, the doctors and the walking wounded, all stricken with fear and confusion. She felt further, spreading her awareness across this mighty and dying warship. So much of its had been torn apart and vented to space. Vacuum-tight bulkheads only sealed if power was working and most of the ship was in the dark now. Some were trapped in compartments steadily losing air, gasping for

breath and clawing at doors that wouldn't open, struggling as they fell into relentless final sleep. Others were already dead, cooling corpses drifting in dark and airless corridors. There was one of the few oxygenated pockets and left and even that wouldn't last long. The cold sterile vacuum was coming for them, extending icy touch bulkhead by bulkhead.

She looked outside *Alliance* and found the battle's last fires gradually, irreversibly burning out. Imperial warships glided through space, packed with crew feeling weary satisfaction for having destroyed the terrorists. She saw TIE fighters still flying cleanup and felt their twinges of conscience as they dove down on helpless escape pods, erased by angry need to avenge their murdered empress. She felt last moments of panic and fear from those trapped inside as the pods burst. One after another after another, they died.

And she felt, saw, heard, knew that a flight of TIEs were swooping toward *Alliance*. Their pilots were priming canons to strafe the unshielded hull, tear its dead metal apart, and spill the last secure pockets of the ship into the vacuum. They were ready to end this and go home.

Marasiah knew what they were going to do, and in the slow-time of the Force she stopped and wondered if she should even care.

No reason to stay alive presented itself. None. Bit by bit she'd been stripped of her power, her possessions, her family, all the people she'd loved. Finally she'd lost her most precious delusion of self-control and learned true helplessness. The universe had shown her the meaning of defeat and there seemed nothing to do except surrender and die.

And in the slow-time Marasiah contracted in the Force, back onto the emptiness that was herself. And she remembered she was not alone in this corridor. The doctors and wounded all craved to survive, still. Saara was blazed with grief; a painful emotion, but she felt so *alive*.

And then there was Ganner, who'd been stripped of everything, even the Force, even the will to live. And here he was now, blazing as well with a singular purpose. Just like Treis Sinde, just like Antares, he would do anything to protect his empress. It meant far more to him than his own life.

She didn't deserve that. None of them should have died for her. From her emptiness inside came something hot and angry. She'd failed so many of them but she didn't want to fail any more. She pulled the Force into her, empowered it with that rebellious anger, and drew out its strength.

The TIEs were swooping in for their strafing run. She felt them, felt the atom-rending heat of their plasma bolts, and felt *Alliance's* buckled hull so near to breaking. With her will she grabbed those layered durasteel plates, held them, became them. She infused her strength into them and when the TIEs' laser blasts hit she couldn't stop the blasts or contain their scorching damage, but she *pushed* to counteract the kinetic force that should have torn the hull apart and spilled the whole section into the vacuum.

The last blasts tore black gouges in the outermost layer of the hull, spilling ash into space and signaling to those TIE pilots that they'd made a successful run. But the inner layers, the ones that kept Section E precariously sealed against the cold death of space, held.

Marasiah felt the TIEs soar away and knew that she'd done it. Another few hours of life, days if they were lucky. She'd done what she could. Just this one time, no one else would die because of her.

Anger died away, and without that to fuel her she became hollow. Her body tipped to drift limp and weightless in the corridor. Her fire was burned out, and there was only emptiness again.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

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“The number of vessels that escaped after we lost the first interdicator were negligible,” the admiral said. “I would estimate several dozen starfighters but no more than fifteen small shuttlecraft. Their entire fighting force has been destroyed and they will no longer be a threat. I don’t hesitate to call this mission a resounding success.”

The blue tint of Eduoard Fenel’s holo-image was a sharp contrast to the sundown orange of the sky outside Hogrum Chalk’s office window. Hogrum stood in front of his desk, looking at Fenel as Galactic City left daylight behind him. “Where did those shuttles launch from?” he asked.

“The *Alliance*, sir. But I strongly doubt any of the command staff survived. We were able to destroy the bridge with an early volley and the ship went into a drift. The few shuttles escaped shortly thereafter. Then we re-established the interdiction field and closed off their exit point. No more ships escaped, though many tried.”

“And you destroyed them?”

“Of course, sir. Those were your orders.” After a tiny pause Fenel said, “We destroyed the escape pods too. Per your orders.”

“Good,” Hogrum said.

When sending a fleet to surround and destroy Jhoram Bey’s rogue task force, he’d known the slaughter would have to be total. Rulf Yage was probably his most capable admiral, but the man’s conscience occasionally got the better of him.

Fenel was different. The man was ruthless and, just as important, fanatically loyal to the reigning Fel monarch. Hogrum wasn't planning on declaring himself emperor, not yet anyway, but he'd known Fenel wouldn't disappoint his regent.

His only worry was the handful of shuttles that had escaped. Fenel hadn't known that Marasiah had been aboard *Alliance*. If he had, he probably would have refused to fire. So would all of the other officers and pilots in that battle. They believed they were avenging their murdered empress. They had to keep believing it, even as they'd killed her. For their sakes, and for the sake of the Galactic Federation.

A tiny part of Hogrum wished his niece had escaped. Unlike his work against Roan Fel, ordering Marasiah's death had given him no pleasure. With her died the last spark of Elliah. He hadn't slept well since giving the order, and probably wouldn't for many more days, but it was the price that had to be paid.

"What is the current state of your fleet?" he asked Fenel. "Have you begun dismantling the pulse mass generators?"

"We've started to deactivate and retrieve them, yes. Four were destroyed, as I said, but the rest will be returned to the Hapans in good condition."

"I'm glad." Hogrum had had to call in favors with old, barely-remembered relatives to get so many interdicator mines. He was glad they'd come through; without the pulse mass generators many more Alliance ships would have escaped. "Are the rest of your ships still at the combat zone?"

"Yes, but a number need post-battle repairs. With your permission I'd like to send them to the yards at Fondor and Rendilli for refitting."

"Granted. How much of the Alliance fleet remains?"

"Only dead hulls, sir."

"Leave a few ships behind to tear up the wreckage. Also, recover debris from the escape pods. I don't expect outsiders to find the battle site, but if they do..."

"They shouldn't find anything that draws them to.... questionable conclusions. I understand."

"Good."

"Is there anything else, sir?"



“For now? No. I’ll be putting out an announcement soon. The people deserve to know that the terrorists who assaulted Coruscant have been dealt with.”

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to hear it. And the trial, sir?”

“Is nearing completion. I’m deliberating whether to release the news before or after the magistrates reach their decision.”

“I’m sure your choice will be wise,” Fenel said, and Hogrum could tell he meant it. His most loyal admiral snapped a salute. Hogrum favored him with a nod, then killed the holo.

The transmission was over. Galactic City gleamed like gold beyond his window. Hogrum breathed in and out; air rasped faintly through his respirator. Exhaustion took him and he barely made it to the chair. His chair, and Marasiah’s just weeks ago. He remembered all their argument they’d had in this office. Her good intentions and resolve not to become her father had all proved her noble spirit, something that had reminded him of Elliah. But the galaxy needed more than that. She’d let Alliance terrorists and Sith schemers kill her husband and plot to bring down her rule. The entire Federation would have fallen to anarchy, and the legacy she was born to carry, of the Fel Dynasty and the Empire, would have been ruined.

Still, she’d not deserved to die. That stain would remain on Hogrum the rest of his life. He looked at his worn hands and wondered if he’d lived long enough already.

He tried to summon confidence. Everything had gone so well, better than he’d ever anticipated in his plans. Since before the trial his agents had worked hard priming that cell of Alliance die-hards, working its members up for that suicidal attack on the justice center. He’d initially planned for the attack to happen while the prosecution was making arguments but the sudden appearance of Senator Derrol in orbit had forced him to move the timeframe forward. The effect had been spectacular. Just hours ago Tem Brighton, Senate speaker and arch-Alliance partisan, had come to Hogrum privately and said he’d make sure his supporters accepted the outcome of the trial, whatever it was.

Other things had been fortuitous. When Ganner Krieg and Azlyn Rae had gone missing he’d suspected them of

planning to rescue Marasiah. When one of his bodyguards had found a tiny tracking device on his armor Hogrum had learned two things. One: a plan was a foot. Two: Krieg and Rae had help from inside the Imperial Knights. That it had been Treis Sinde was no real surprise; in his way the man had loved Marasiah more than Hogrum had. Sinde fleeing with the empress to Bey's fleet was only mildly unexpected. In any case, that warning had been reason enough for Hogrum to implant a similar tracking device inside Marasiah. He hadn't put it there expecting her to lead him to Bey, but she had. Dimly, Hogrum wondered if the silent Force was favoring him. He hoped not; as he'd told Marasiah, he'd had enough of the Force. The galaxy was better off without it.

The fact that it might not be wholly gone gave him disquiet. They'd only captured one of Marasiah's rescuers, an old Mandalorian woman who'd been hired by Krieg and Rae. Hogrum had been too busy orchestrating Bey's destruction to interrogate her personally, and the reports he'd read had indicated nothing special about her.

But the woman's escape raised questions. Very little of it had been caught on camera. The cascade of security failures was unexplained. Likewise, her rescue ship had known exactly where to swoop in despite her location being a well-kept secret.

Most discomfiting of all, that rescue ship had been a scarlet-hulled *Helox*-class freighter. Eyewitness reports and TIE gun-camera footage matched it with the *Mynock*, chosen vehicle of Cade Skywalker.

Hogrum knew about Skywalker's mission. He'd gone on a mad bantha chase after a supposed Yuuzhan Vong Jedi, in the hopes that might show a way to regain the Force. The very idea was ridiculous and he'd never taken bit seriously, but if that *had* been Skywalker, then the galaxy had at least one Force-powered meddler still out there. He didn't like that at all.

Worse, it may not be just one. Eyewitnesses to the Mandalorian woman's escape described actions that only a trained Force-user should have been able to accomplish. Maybe Cade Skywalker had found a way to share his powers after all. Or maybe there was *another* Skywalker. It had been

forty-five years since he'd seen Roan's first cousin, a Fel by birth but by choice some strange mix of Jedi and Mandalorian. On Roan's order he'd tracked her later and found Marin Solo living a civilian life, hauling cargo and keeping out of galactic affairs. After the Sith-Imperial War she'd seemingly disappeared. The daughter Ania had turned up to alternately aid and aggravate Marasiah, but the mother's fate was unknown.

Perhaps there was another Skywalker out there after all. That was trouble he'd have to deal with, in time.

The entrails of the *Alliance's* Section F were a black maze of bulkheads and sealed-tight portals. There was no power, no light, no gravity, and no life support. There seemed to be no breaches either; this small portion of the dead ship had apparently retained hull integrity if nothing else. Instead of slipping away into the void, the breathable atmosphere was instead converted to carbon dioxide breath-by-breath by the handful of survivors trapped inside. There was no way to purify the air and no way to replenish it. Every second of life was a second stolen from the future.

It was a bleak place to die in, and Saara found herself wishing she'd joined with Porat in his last moments. Quick asphyxiation was preferable to slow, and they'd have been together besides.

Without Ganner Krieg's lightsaber they'd be utterly trapped. The Knight carved through portals, gifting them with fresh air pockets as they passed through new hallways and into unused chambers. Every so often they found other survivors, usually in ones or twos. Once they found a chamber packed with seven engineers choking on their last slivers of oxygen. Saara hadn't been happy to save them. With seven more bodies they were drinking up oxygen all the faster. The small piece of Sith still inside her said they should have let those seven die to prolong their own lives.

The small part was getting larger. She had no Force to draw on, no dark side to fuel her anger, but Porat's death had left a bitter wound. She recalled their last moments together, again and again; more, she recalled their first moments after she'd revealed her whole truth to him. She remembered his

shock but also his forgiveness. He'd given her more than she deserved and she hadn't been able to repay him. Someone had to be held accountable.

Hogrum Chalk was the architect of all this. She gathered that from what Ganner Krieg explained as they drifted through the dark. Since losing the Force she'd tried to separate herself from Sith teachings but she was starting to think, once more, that revenge was a very fine motivator. It wasn't right that someone might could bring such horrors. Someone else had to make him pay and Saarai very much wished she could do it herself.

Some things didn't deserve to be forgiven. Some things required revenge. If only she could give it.

Neither Saarai nor Ganner knew much about this warship's internal layout, but one of the doctors led their increasingly large herd to a food storage unit. Even with power down the chamber was well-refrigerated, and everyone groped through the dark and claimed something to eat. There wasn't much point to filling your stomach when you were doomed die, but everyone seemed to find comfort in the ritual.

Everyone, Saarai noticed, except Marasiah Fel.

As they picked up more survivors they made no effort to point out the group's famous member. None of the newcomers seemed to recognize her at all, partially for the poor light but also because there was nothing of an empress about that woman. She drifted along in her loose white hospital shift, pushing off walls to keep moving but saying nothing. She mostly hovered behind Ganner, following his lead in silence.

When they found the food storage area and started eating, Marasiah didn't join. Her body curled as she floated in the outside corridor, knees bending to chest, hands drifting limp in front of her face. She could have been dead, but when Saarai flashed her light on her she saw open eyes and the rise and fall of breath. Her brown hair was a messy sprawl, weightless around her head. The dyed-white stripe, mark of the Fel monarchs, bent forward to drift in front of her face.

With an extra pack of rations in hand, Ganner pushed toward her. "You need to have some food, Majesty. It will keep your strength up."

Marasiah didn't respond, didn't budge. Her eyes were set on the white locks in front of her. Saaraï joined Ganner in moving toward her.

"You need to eat something," he pressed, "Please, Majesty. We all need you with us."

Marasiah's eyes fluttered. Then, with no warning, she grabbed the white hair with both hands and violently pulled. Her whole body retched and a pained, animal moan escaped clenched teeth as she tore a fistful of hair from her scalp.

"What's she doing?" Saaraï gasped. "Make her stop!"

Ganner lunged forward. Marasiah twisted, grabbed more white hair, and pulled. By the time Ganner reached her and pinned her arms to her side she'd ripped out nearly all the dyed-white strands. The gap in her hairline was welling with red and a few specks of blood floating free in the zero-g. She struggled in Ganner's arms for a few seconds, then wilted. Her body shuddered but she made no sound.

One of the doctors pushed out of the storage room. "What happened? Is she hurt?"

Ganner didn't know what to say. Saaraï asked the doctor, "Do you have any dermal patches? Any bacta slips?"

"I... one of the others might...."

"Get one."

The doctor floated back into the storage room. Saaraï hovered in the middle with the doorway on one side, Ganner and the empress on the other. She belonged to neither group and knew it. Since leaving the Sith and losing the Force only Porat had known her secret. Only Porat had known her at all. In the short time she had left alive nobody would ever know her again.

The knowledge filled her with fresh anger. Someone had to be held accountable. Someone had to pay. If she'd had the Force she could have at least re-embraced that dark side power and gained some strength. Instead she had nothing and soon she would be nothing.

At least it wouldn't be long, Saaraï thought as she watched the battered knight cradling his broken empress.

Marin had prepared herself for just about anything on their flight to Admiral Bey's no-longer-hidden fleet. The situation,

from the little she'd been told, sounded dire. When it was announced they were nearing their destination crowded into *Mynock's* cockpit along with Ania, Azlyn, Cade Skywalker, and his two crewmates. Tension was high; everyone was braced to jump into a ferocious combat zone.

What they got instead was a graveyard. Dead gray warships tumbled slowly through space, some Imperial but mostly Alliance. Marin's eyes marked pieces of Mon Calamari cruisers and mighty star destroyers, engine clusters from corvettes, twisted solar panels from TIE fighters and blown-off S-foils. The debris stretched on for thousands of kilometers. *Mynock* drifted deeper into the battlezone, *Free Agent* close behind it. Hondo Karr and *Black Justice*, expecting a bloody fight they weren't getting paid for, had recused themselves from this mission. Marin didn't hold it against them.

Even Cade and his crew, who seemed normally quick with the smart remark, watched the ruin float by in reverent silence. Ania was the one to whisper, "It was a massacre."

Cade's eyes tracked the wreckage of a TIE fighter. "Maybe. But Bey's people gave some back."

"Not enough," Azlyn said. "Can we find the *Alliance*? It was Bey's flagship. We dropped the empress off there."

"We know the *Alliance*," Deliah said. "We flew off its deck a lot at the end of the last war. What we *thought* was the last war."

"If this was a war it's already done," said Jariah, and he was right. Marin imagined Bey's entire fleet had been destroyed here. The question was whether the Imperials had taken Marasiah and others prisoner, or whether they'd just slaughtered them indiscriminately.

As they scoured the debris Marin thought she saw fast-moving light from distant thrust-trails, and Jariah, eyes on his scanner, said, "Check that. There's still some live ships out here. I'm betting it's the Imp clean-up crew."

"With all this mess it's a little easier to hide," Deliah said as she worked *Mynock* in slow curves around the debris. She kept the close to larger chunks to evade detection.

"Give Jao and Sauk a warning," Ania said. "Make sure they know to stay hidden."

“Sure thing,” Jariah said, and sent a quick warning through the comm.

They worked their way deeper and deeper into the debris field. Marin spotted only occasional flights of TIE fighters but those weren’t lightspeed capable. There had to be at least one carrier or frigate out here, watching over the graveyard.

“There she is,” Deliah whispered as the gnarled ruin of a star destroyer filled the viewport.

It was bigger than the standard *Pellaeon*-class ships and its flanks had been marked by gold Alliance crests, now pocked and torn by impact craters. The upper portion of the ship was chewed up and blackened, the command tower completely gone. The lower half fared somewhat better but the nose was badly chewed up. Deep impact-tears ran down the other parts of its hull. There were no running lights. Marin’s gut told her the entire ship had been emptied to the vacuum.

Still, they had to check. As *Mynock* and *Free Agent* soared in they decreased engine power and used repulsors to maneuver close to the sprawling wreck. It would make them a little harder for patrolling TIEs to spot. Marin ignored the danger and tried to search for life in the ruin. She closed her eyes, steadied breathing, and reached out. She sensed Cade was reaching too.

Amidst so much vacuum-cold void, even the faintest life was like a beacon. Marin sensed one cluster in the ventral part of the ship, approximately midway down its length. She didn’t know how many people but they were weak, hungry, tired, scared, and teetering on the abyss of despair.

And she felt one mind she knew for certain. It was Marasiah Fel’s, she was certain of that, but not like she’d known it during their short time together on Coruscant. Her distinctive conscious was focused but weak. She might have been badly injured.

“I feel her,” Marin muttered.

Azlyn pounced on that. “The empress? Is she alive?”

“I feel her too,” Cade said. “She feels...”

“What?” Azlyn pressed.

“In trouble,” he finished. “They’re probably running out of air and freezing to death. We have to tell ‘em to find an airlock or something where we can pick ‘em up.”

"We," Marin repeated. "You mean you and I."

"Maybe." Azlyn's hand dove to her pocket and came out with a comlink. "Ganner or Master Sinde might be with her. Imperial Knights have special comms for long-range communication. I don't know if it will work. We need to get as close to the empress as we can."

"I can get us close, but I'll need directions." Deliah glanced over her shoulder at Cade.

"Don't worry about it." He tapped her shoulder. "I'll take the helm."

When Ganner's comlink buzzed he thought he was imaging it. Without gravity and light, with the oxygen getting thin, everything was becoming unmoored from reality. That was the only way to describe what had happened to the empress. They'd bandaged the part of her scalp where she'd torn her hair out but she was barely moving under her own power. Ganner and two of the doctors took turns pushing her weightless, curled-up body down the halls as they searched for pockets of fresh air.

The comlink buzzed and buzzed but he didn't believe it was real until the Drallish doctor beside him asked, "Are you going to get that?"

Ganner blinked. "Get what?"

"Your comm. Who the devil could be calling you?"

Ganner fumbled for it, turned it on, and brought it to his lips. "This is Ganner Krieg. Is this... someone?"

"Ganner? It's me, Azlyn." Her voice was sweeter than any new air-pocket. "Are you all right? Are the empress and Master Sinde alive?"

"I... I'm fine, Azlyn. I'm alive, anyway. So is the empress. Not Master Sinde. He... was killed. But I have Sia. Where are *you*?"

"We've got two ships out here. You need to find an airlock. How many of you are there?"

He tried to count the crowd packed into the black hall and knew he'd fail. "I don't know. A few dozen. Azlyn... how did you *find* us?"

"We got Ania's mother out," she said, which was all the explanation needed. "We've picked up a few more friends



too. Can you find an airlock? A hatch? Even a viewport you can carve your way out through?"

Ganner looked to the nearest doctor. The Drall's snout twitched awkwardly. "I... haven't been on this ship long. But I'm sure we have someone who can get us to an exit."

"Then find one," Ganner said firmly, and the doctor floated off to find help. To Azlyn he said, "We'll get there as fast as we can. Just hold tight."

"Great. May the Force be with you, Ganner."

Her cheer was like music, and as he shut off the comm Ganner believed that, for once, it truly was. But when he looked at Marasiah, floating still apart from the crowd's new frenzy, he doubted once more.

Thanks to a combination of comlinks and Force-powers, they were able to figure out where to pick up *Alliance's* small package of survivors. There were two airlocks close by and apparently intact, and *Mynock* and *Free Agent* each nestled up to one.

Jariah and Deliah sat tight as everyone else went down for the rescue. He kept checking his scanners for signs of nearby TIE patrols but with a massive, dead star destroyer blocking half their range, sensors only did so much.

"They'd better get 'em out quickly," Deliah said. She was back in the pilot's seat, pink knuckles wrapped around the throttle.

"They'll them as fast as they can."

Deliah shifted anxiously in her seat. It wasn't fast enough. They'd had to lower their shields to dock with *Alliance* and Jariah felt dangerously naked. He checked his scanners again. Still nothing. He heard the sound of footsteps and chatter as people moved into the crew lounge, down the hall from the cockpit and close to the airlock.

Jariah tapped the comm button on and called down to the airlock vestibule. "How are we doing down there?"

His response was one of R2-D2's whistles. It sounded vaguely encouraging but he couldn't parse the details.

He was about to close the link when he got a bad feeling. It came out of nowhere. He checked his sensors and they looked clear, minus the sea of cold debris. But something

bad was coming, he was sure of that. It wasn't just nerves, it was knowledge.

It was that damn Force coming back to nag him. It had mostly left him alone after they'd cleared Rohakalla but a little bit of it was still here and he'd never be rid of it.

The Force told him a TIE patrol was coming in fast. He swung to the weapons console and took control over the laser turrets. Deliah asked what he'd seen but he didn't answer. He didn't see, he knew.

Jariah twisted *Mynock's* main laser turret and lifted its firing arc just above the vast spread of *Alliance's* hull. His thumb twitched over the trigger. Not yet, not yet.

Now. Jariah sent out a hail of laser blasts that shot straight in parallel to the destroyer's gnarled plane. They whipped into the distance and dwindled, then intersected with a pair of TIE Predators just as they rounded *Alliance's* hull and came into view. They vanished into fireballs before they knew what hit them.

Jariah's body was tingling with adrenaline and something more. Deliah marveled, "Stang, how did you do that?"

"How do you think?" He threw her a look. If these Force powers helped him shoot things better maybe they weren't so bad after all.

"Are we clear?"

Jariah checked his sensors: nothing but debris. The Force wasn't nagging him at the moment either. "I think we're good for now, but those other Imps probably saw the boom. Even if they didn't they'll send more scouts soon."

He turned back to the comm node, still transmitting, and said, "Guys, we're gonna have company! Tell me we're ready to wrap this up!"

"Wrapping up now!" said the tall, messy-haired blond man as he pressed his body against the wall to let the last few survivors stagger into the ship's halls. As she brushed past him Saarai realize with a start that he looked like Cade Skywalker, Darth Krayt's killer and nemesis. She was starting to wonder if oxygen loss was causing hallucinations.

The breath of fresh, recycled air hit them like a wall when they came aboard. Actual gravity was stunning too, and

some survivors struggled for their first walking steps. Nonetheless, pure oxygen gave them all new spirit and many broke into giddy smiles at having survived. Saaraï had too much grief for that, but she felt quiet marvel for being alive. Everyone looked better except the empress, who was a shambling mess. Ganner held her by one shoulder and the doctor who's staunched the bleeding on her face held the other, though dried blood still matted on her forehead.

Several more people were there to guide the newcomers through the halls and into a messy crew lounge with sofas and table. Saaraï marked Azlyn Rae among them, as well as Ania Solo. There was also an older woman with gray hair and a younger one, maybe still in her teens. When Saaraï saw the lightsaber dangling from her belt she almost stumbled.

In front of her, Ganner handed the empress off to Ania and the old woman, who shuffled her out of the cramped lounge to someplace private. Saaraï sidled next to Ganner as Azlyn said, "I can't believe we got out all out alright. I thought Marasiah might have been injured. She's all right, isn't she?"

Ganner's face wavered. His eyes went dark and sad, and he shook his head.

Suddenly the man who looked like Cade Skywalker shouted, "Incoming TIEs! We gotta move! Everybody hold on to something!"

As soon as he said it the ship started rocking. Through layered bulkheads they heard an awful scraping sounds as they wrenched free of *Alliance's* airlock. Sudden movement threw half the survivors into walls, and Saaraï was saved that only because she fell into Ganner instead. The ship jerked, swooped, and shuddered.

"Are we taking fire?" asked Saaraï, but nobody answered.

Ganner and Azlyn were trying to usher people out of the overpacked crew lounge and into the halls, where they'd at least have something to brace against. Saaraï allowed herself to be carried with the flow.

The ship continued to jerk and jostle, and several times it seemed to take laserfire against its shields, but then she felt it lurch into hyperspace, and then everything was still.

The other survivors sensed it too. Some exhaled in relief. A few broke out into giddy laughs, amazed at life.

Survival settled into Saaraï as a new state of being. Even as she'd given herself up for dead back on *Alliance* she'd craved a chance to avenge Porat and all the other dead. It had seemed a vain dream then, but now it was possible. More than possible. It was something she could take into her own hands.

Possibilities dazed her. She slinked further from the crowd to a lonely corner where she could think. As she tried to still her mind she looked down the hall and saw a single figure.

One Twi'lek woman, bare face and limbs turned into a canvas of red and black tattoos. Saaraï's jaw dropped. She had to be seeing things. She smacked herself, hard, but Darth Talon was still there. The Twi'lek's eyes had gone a little wide in surprise, the only hint of emotion on that beautiful stoic face.

Even when she'd been her father's apprentice, few of the One Sith had known who and what Saaraï was. Darth Talon was one of them. Very likely, she was the last living person in the galaxy who knew Saaraï was the daughter of Darth Wyyrlok.

The two women stared at each other from across the distance of the hall, so close to the clamor of the crowd but utterly apart from it. Saaraï wanted to do so many things at once: call out, plead for Talon to keep silent, charge her now and snap her neck to make sure never talked. But she was too shocked to do any of that.

In the end, Talon responded with the tiniest of nods. Then she turned a corner and stepped out of view. Saaraï stared at the blank wall for a long moment, wondering if she'd been hallucinating after all. Then she rushed to the end, turned the corner, looked down the corridor Talon had disappeared down, and saw only emptiness.

Saaraï retreated to the crew lounge. The blond-haired man was shouting instructions to the survivors, and as he stared at him she became certain he was the Cade Skywalker who'd menaced the Sith and destroyed Darth Krayt. First Talon, then Skywalker, and Marasiah Fel for certain, all on this ship. Saaraï knew that either she'd gone mad or the galaxy had; perhaps both. There was no other explanation.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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When the Jedi departed Coruscant they did it quietly this time. There was no battle at their Temple, no fire in the sky. They simply loaded up all their ships and flew away, leaving a hollow shell behind.

The Jedi had locked themselves away in their Temple since the attack on Coruscant. Security footage placed the ship that had rescued Marasiah as having stopped at their facility shortly beforehand. Hogrum had requested explanation. They'd said nothing. They were something else he'd have to deal with now that more important affairs were wrapping up.

They'd made no public statement, even after leaving, but as soon as they were gone a message from K'Kruhk and the Jedi Council was hand-delivered by a Twi'lek named Shado Vao. Hogrum was familiar with him, for his role at Bakura, his exploits as a Jedi, and his familial connection to his aide. Marasiah's aide. Hogrum still hadn't decided whether he wanted to keep Astraal Vao at his side. He'd had bigger concerns. Maybe soon he could get down to smaller ones.

Astraal ushered her brother into the regent's office, and after a lingering look left them there. Shado was dressed in a plain tunic, not Jedi robes, and he had no lightsaber at his waist. Hogrum decided to take that as a good omen; at least one Jedi had finally started to accept the reality that his blessed Force had vanished along with their Order's relevance.

"Thank you for seeing me, Regent," Shado said. He clasped a single datapad to his chest.

"Are you here to relay a message from the Jedi Council, Master Vao?"

"I am." He licked his lower lip nervously but didn't hand the datapad over.

"Though the Jedi are no longer part of the government, they're still Federation citizens," Hogrum said gruffly. "I hope they haven't done anything treasonous. For their sakes."

"That's not for me to say, sir. I am... no longer aligned with the Jedi."

Hogrum didn't need the Force to tell something was awry with the Twi'lek. Still holding the datapad tight, he was staring at the regent with a hollow expression but probing eyes.

Hogrum tried to pry. "You're no longer a Jedi, yet they've entrusted their last message to you. Is that correct?"

"I volunteered, sir. Someone had to stay behind."

He didn't try asking where they'd gone. He had a feeling Shado didn't know. He didn't understand what was going on in the ex-Jedi's mind and didn't care. He needed to know if the Council was going to be a threat. He held his hand across the desk, beckoning for the datapad. Finally, Shado handed it over.

Taking it in both hands, not yet looking at the screen, Hogrum asked, "What will you do now, Master Vao? Will you remain on Coruscant?"

"I hope not," Shado said, slightly choked. Those haunted eyes lingered on him for a moment more, then broke away. "If that's all, sir, I'd like to go now."

Hogrum leaned back, regarding him. His instincts told him that Shado Vao was no threat to anyone, except perhaps himself. He would carefully inquire with Astraal about this later; for now he needed to know the Council's intent.

"Go," Hogrum said, nodding to the door.

Shado went. He slipped through without a word, leaving the office empty and quiet. If he exchanged anything with his sister, Hogrum heard none of it.

Putting the Vao siblings from his mind, he turned his attention to the Jedi's farewell. It was a polite and circumspect thing, as he'd expected from K'Kruhk, but the message

was clear. The Jedi Order had no part to play on Coruscant anymore and were withdrawing. The statement implied that they disapproved of Chalk's activities and vague language hinted that they even knew what he'd done with Marasiah.

But they had no proof and accused him of nothing publicly. That fact reigned above all and it filled Hogrum with relief. His agents were also hunting the scant ships that had escaped Bey's fleet, and he was increasingly confident that Marasiah was not among them. Other agents would watch Admiral Slossar's Alliance forces closely to make sure they stayed loyal. The self-removal of the Jedi was, he thought, a welcome thing. They were one less complication to deal with.

More important than the Jedi's leaving, however, was the end of Gar Stazi's trial. After the heinous attack by Alliance radicals- the few survivors had their own trials coming up- the judges had had no choice but to accept hard evidence and public will. Stazi, Kaige, and Nelloran were found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder. On Hogrum's urging, their sentence was to be life imprisonment instead of execution.

He'd chosen that for a few reasons. Marasiah had urged him to show mercy so the general public and remaining Alliance senators would be better disposed to him. It was a good reason, and one of his main ones, but there were other causes to keep them alive. Dead they were martyrs; now they lingered at the edge of public imagination in a state of disgrace. Only a handful of Alliance die-hards would support them now. Some would plot to free them from the maximum-security prisons they'd be placed in. They were perfect bait to draw out radicals and Hogrum's agents would be watching.

Everything had worked out so perfectly, he wondered once more if the Force really was helping him, even if he didn't want it to.

He hoped not. He wanted to think of this victory as one of his own making.

The day after the Jedi's departure was unusually calm. It seemed all storms had passed, leaving the Galactic Federation and his place atop it stronger than ever. And then, midday Galactic City time, Astraal brought him a most unusual report. A starship had dropped into Coruscant's

atmosphere, flown right into secure government airspace, and surrendered itself to authorities. The pilot claimed that he was the last survivor of the One Sith, and that he wanted an audience with the regent.

Sith did not get to make requests. Hogrum's people had arrested the young man and taken him to a secure facility. They'd run full body-scans on his person and found nothing unusual. Technicians were analyzing his ship's computer and extracting navigational data; from their reports it seemed like he'd already erased much of it.

They're tried to put the man through interrogation. Though they'd refrained from using the truly hard techniques, he was impressively resistant to their suggestions. He had a secret he was guarding, and he'd only tell it to the regent.

That evening, after reviewing all the reports and recordings, Hogrum decided to fulfill Eli Horn's request.

The interrogators had placed the young man in a duracrete-walled room and strapped his limbs to a chair. There were a few bruises on his face from when questioning had gotten rough but there was spirit in his eyes when Hogrum walked into the room. The young man was not bowed; on the contrary, he looked like someone who'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

"I am not in the habit of entertaining Sith guests," Hogrum said. "The last time we captured one, I killed him myself."

"I'm not a Sith," the young man said.

"You claimed to be."

"No. I told your people I *was* One Sith. But I'm not anymore. The One Sith are dead and even if they weren't I'd want no part of them."

"Then what do you want?"

Eli Horn lifted his head to stare Hogrum in the eye. "I want your help."

He found himself impressed by the young man's brazenness. "You're in no position to ask for it."

"I know. But this will benefit us both."

"You presume much. I still know little about you. You've done an impressive job of confounding my interrogators."

"I know." Eli smiled tiredly. "Do you want to know how?"

"I very much would."



His expression relaxed. Suddenly Hogrum found himself being lifted off his feet. They kicked in midair for a few seconds before he was gently lowered down.

*The Force.* This young man had the Force.

And that changed everything.

"I can feel it," Eli Horn muttered. "You're afraid."

Hogrum was. If they'd found a way to get the Force back- if Skywalker's mad quest had born fruit- then the Jedi's flight meant something totally different from what he'd thought. They could all be getting the Force back right now, and if they knew what he'd done to Marasiah his entire reign was in jeopardy.

"Don't worry," the young man smiled. "The Force isn't coming back. Not if I get your help."

"Explain," Hogrum demanded.

Eli explained. The story was long and strange. If it weren't for the display a moment ago Hogrum would never have believed it. Instead he had no choice but to accept. There was a world that inflicted Force-powers on anyone who touched it, regardless of their midi-chlorian count. In theory every sentient in the galaxy might touch the Force now. The idea made Hogrum's heart quail. The Force corrupted as much as it empowered. Granting the Force to everyone would mean anarchy and destruction. At worst it could create a war of light versus dark that would dwarf any skirmish between Jedi and Sith.

"Don't worry," Eli assured him. "You don't have to worry about that planet anymore. I destroyed the hypergate."

Hogrum regarded him carefully. "Why?"

"Because the Force is dangerous. It seduces you. It promises to give you everything but in the end it works itself through you. It tears you between light and dark when all you want to be is a man." Eli swallowed. "I wish I didn't have the Force, but I do. I can't get rid of it, but I can make sure nobody else has to suffer because of it. So I destroyed the gate. And then I flew here, to talk to you."

Hogrum very much wanted to know why, but he said, "My engineers have examined your starship. They've found some pieces of navigational data have been erased and can't be recovered. You're hiding the location of the gateway."

“That’s right. There’s nothing there anymore. You don’t need to bother it.”

“Then why delete its location? That implies you don’t trust me.”

“I don’t.” Eli smiled bitterly. “And you don’t trust me. There’s no reason you should. But we need each other and that’s more important than trust.”

The brazenness was stunning, but Hogrum had no rebuttal. “Why did you delete the location?”

“There are still some... beings there. Without their gate they’re harmless. They deserve to be left alone.”

“You’re protecting the people you betrayed.”

“Yes. It’s not regret. I was a Sith and I killed too many people for no reason at all. I’m trying to break that habit.”

Hogrum wasn’t sure if he believed Eli but belief was as irrelevant as trust. “You say we need each other. You’d best explain that.”

“I destroyed the gate to that ancient world. That planet’s locked away at the heart of the galaxy and should be impassable. But there are other planets like it, planets in the Deep Core that are millions of years old and rich with raw Force power like nothing you can imagine. They could have the same effect of restoring the Force.”

He started to understand. “You want my resources to find and destroy those worlds.”

“I doubt you could destroy them. But you could interdict them. Prevent people from finding them. There are still searchers out there. Cade Skywalker still has the Force, and some of his companions have it too. They’ll be looking for another way to get the Force back. I’m sure of it.”

“And for that we need each other.”

Eli presumed much, but he had the Force. Hogrum was used to having more information than anyone in the room, and this young man’s presence disturbed him. But as Eli had said, they did need each other.

Quietly he asked, “Why did you come to me? How do you know I won’t find one of these planets and send all my Knights there to regain the Force? Or that I won’t send legions of stormtroopers and create a Force-powered army like the galaxy’s never seen?”

"I don't know. But I believe. I know what you've done and I can see you in the Force." Eli's eyes narrowed, like he was staring into Hogrum's soul. "You're a bulwark against chaos. You want order above everything. And you hate the Force, because you can never control it. You think the galaxy would be better off without it and you were glad when it disappeared."

Hogrum shuddered. After a life among Force-users he'd learned to block his thoughts. Even after losing his powers his discipline had succeeded in walling off Marasiah. But this man- perhaps because of innate skill, or because he saw Hogrum with fresh eyes and no personal connection- understood him perfectly.

Hogrum stared at that face, smooth despite its bruises, so young but frighteningly wise. Yes, he was scared of Eli Horn, but the man was right. Hogrum needed him. They needed each other.

"You came to me," he said. "I presume you have something specific in mind."

"I do," Eli nodded. "Skywalker and his companions will start looking for more Force-powered planets. And I know where they'll start. I kept that part in my nav computer."

"And you want to take me there."

A grateful, tired smile spread on his face. "Yes. To stop them, we're going to need power only you can command."

The fourth moon of the gas giant Yavin remarkable only for historical reasons. Nowadays it had no sentient population and was located far from any spacelanes, so there was nothing to recommend a visit. Its once-great temples, built by an ancient Sith empire and appropriated by the reborn Jedi as a praxeum, had been mostly crushed by the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. More than a century on, the moon's wild jungle had done the rest. Great creeper vines had crawled up thick wall fragments and tugged them down brick-by-brick. Tall grass flourished as the heart of the oldest temple fell open to the sun.

Desolate and forgotten, yet rich with significance, it was as good a place as any for this unlikely congregation. No large ships had set down between the ruined temples, in the grassy

fields as yet unclaimed by the advancing jungle. The ones that had were a motley mix: rugged freighters like *Mynock* and *Free Agent* mixed with two Alliance-model military shuttles and a few Crossfire escorts. A single green-hulled Jedi shuttle rested in the grass, but most remarkable was the ship beside it. The wide-winged craft possessed a smooth green hull and no traditional engines to speak of. It was the sort that would have drawn stares at any port, and even then nobody would have marked it as an organic flyer based on Yuuzhan Vong technology from Zonama Sekot.

They'd come from all over, and being fugitive was their one thing in common.

Beings from every group converged in *Mynock's* crew lounge for a one-of-a-kind conference. The ship had been emptied of its former passengers, who'd joined the rest of *Alliance's* survivors. In their place was a more select company. Cade Skywalker commanded attention but so did Jedi Grand Master K'Kruhk. A Yuuzhan Vong named Khat Lah sat among them, drawing stares. Ania Solo drew fewer eyes. Marasiah Fel was present along with her two surviving Knights, but she was hardly the woman known galaxy-wide on holo-broadcasts. Her hair had been rearranged to cover the portion torn away, but the lack of white highlight was glaring. A handful of survivors from *Alliance* were also present, including the pilot Anj Dahl.

Saarai was surprised to be among them, and not just because of the august company. She was amazed to be free at all. Darth Talon wasn't present at this meeting but Saara knew she was aboard and was real. Skywalker himself had confirmed it, without explaining. That meant she wasn't mad, but the galaxy certainly was.

She couldn't figure out why Talon hadn't turned her in. The Twi'lek knew who she was and what she'd been. Saara was certain of it. Every One Sith knew Talon had been Krayt's most fanatic servant. Her whole reason for being had been to serve him. That Talon would never have let the daughter of her master's betrayer go free.

Gradually, Saara came to the only possible conclusion. Losing the Force, and everything that had followed, must have fundamentally changed Talon as well.

The meeting began with catch-up. Anj Dahl did most of the talking, explaining what the Alliance fleet had tried and failed to do. Saarai felt compelled to speak on Porat's behalf and emphatically assured the others that they'd had no part in the attack on Coruscant. They'd intended no violence. Everything had been a distraction to ensure the empress' rescue.

Marasiah didn't look grateful for the aid. In a dull voice she said, "Even though this is all true, the rest of the galaxy believes otherwise. Even the ones who should be our allies." She looked to K'Kruhk. "You did a brave thing leaving Coruscant, Master Jedi, but I think it was foolish. You've made an enemy of my uncle, and others will view you with suspicion."

"Let them." The old Whiphid spread his claws. "We did nothing holed up on Coruscant. Chalk did not want our assistance and we had little to give. Besides, we could not side with him in good conscience when we found out what he did to you."

"Then will you help us?" Saarai asked. In a mad galaxy it almost made sense that an ex-Sith should side with ex-Jedi.

"That depends? What do you wish to do?"

Saarai knew what she intended. Chalk had to be fought. His government had to be brought down. She didn't care what violence it would bring. He needed to be brought to justice, for the sake of Porat and so many others.

But she deferred to Anj Dahl. The pilot said, "We can't just surrender. We'd be killed, like everyone else from the fleet. Before the battle we told Admiral Slossar about the empress, and what we intended. It's not safe to contact him now, but he knows the truth."

"You can't expect him to start a civil war for you," Ganner Krieg said. "Not when all those Alliance senators are siding with Chalk."

"Nobody wants a war and nobody's in a position to make one," Anj said. "Jhoram... Admiral Bey knew that. He had a full fleet at his disposal but did everything to resolve this without fighting."

"And look where that got him," Marasiah said bitterly.

It was a hard point to argue. Saarai gave the only response she could. "We can't let Chalk get away with it. It isn't right."

K'Kruhk shook his shaggy head. "If you wish to wage a guerilla war against an empire... it has been done before. And we Jedi have helped you. If some of our Order wish to join your cause, I won't stop them. But there is other work for us to do."

"Such as?" asked Anj.

The Whiphid looked to the Yuuzhan Vong. He had no tattoos or scars but his sloping forehead and thin lips still recalled the monsters from horror-stories. In smooth, barely-accented basic Khat Lah said, "The Force is not totally silent. We briefly opened a door that allowed some of us to regain the Force. That door is now closed, but others may remain. If the Jedi wish to help us search, they're more than welcome. We will have to cast a wide net."

Saarai frowned. "Does that mean *you* can use the Force? How is that possible? Yuuzhan Vong don't even have midi-chlorians."

That was a little more knowledge than expected from a senator's wife and it got her a few looks, but Khat Lah said, "The midi-chlorians were merely a link to the Force, a conduit, but it flows through all life. Properly empowered and attuned, any being could use it."

Saarai didn't like the sound of that. Liberation from the Force had saved her from the dark side. It had shown her love and light she'd never expected. Though part of her wanted any weapon to strike at Chalk with, another part of her feared getting the Force back. She was terrified of becoming the person she'd been.

"So let me get this straight," Ganner said. "You're going to spread across the galaxy, looking for this... door that can open the Force to you?"

"There are ancient worlds where the Force is stronger than anything you can imagine," Khat Lah said. "Most are locked away at the very heart of the galaxy. I only hope we can still reach them."

"So while the rest of us are trying to fight Chalk, you'll be wandering around, looking for secrets."

"Secrets that may change everything," said K'Kruhk. "Don't you want the Force back, Master Krieg?"

"Of course I do," Ganner said, but Saaraï could hear reservation.

"As I said, I will not hold Jedi to any task. Those who wish to fight Chalk can fight. Those who want to search can search. Those who wish to leave the Jedi entirely can do so as well. I know one who has already done so."

His eyes turned to Azlyn, who frowned. "Who are you talking about?"

"You know Shado Vao."

Azlyn's jaw dropped. Ganner sighed. Skywalker, who'd been mostly quiet until now, said, "What, Shado just quit? He's the straightest arrow I've ever seen. You've got it wrong."

"I wish it were so, but something has changed in Master Vao," K'Kruhk said. "Something has changed in us all."

As Skywalker and the Knights tried to grapple with that, Anj said, "I'm sorry about your friend, but there's nothing we can do about that now. Master K'Kruhk, our invitation's open to any Jedi, but it's not open for long. We're going to have to scatter, go into hiding, and plot our next step. We won't be easy to find then, so if any of your Jedi want to commit, they'll have to do it before we leave this place."

"I understand. I will tell them."

"Thank you." Anj shifted eyes to the empress. "Majesty, we'll do everything we can to keep you safe. You're our proof Chalk's a liar. When the time's right we'll make sure the whole galaxy knows your story. And then—"

"No," Marasiah said.

Everyone stared. Azlyn started, "Majesty..."

"I am *not* your majesty. I am *not* your empress." She ran a hand over her forehead, baring the bandaged patch on her scalp.

"Yes, you are," Ganner insisted. "Chalk is the pretender. You're our rightful ruler. Everyone knows that."

He waved a hand at Anj, begging support. The pilot said, "He's right, Majesty. We need you to lead us."

"And how many of your people are already dead because of me?"

Anj didn't answer. The answer was too high for anyone to count.

Marasiah jerked to her feet. "I'll tell you what you should do. You should flee to the Outer Rim, throw away your weapons, and live far away from Chalk and everything he's done. You should forget."

"We can't forget our dead," Saaraï snapped.

"If you insist on fighting he'll destroy you." Her bitter gaze passed around the room. "For your own sakes, *don't*. You're lucky to have your lives. Don't throw them away."

"We won't be. We'll be doing what's *right*."

"You can do what you wish, but you won't be doing it for my sake. I won't let you."

Ganner rose and took her arm. "Empress, please—"

"I'm *not* your empress!" It came out as a sob and she jerked her arm free. "I'm not taking part in any of this. I won't let you die for me. *Any* of you."

She lurched for the exit. Ganner grabbed for her again but an invisible Force-push shoved him back, knocking him and Azlyn both onto the couch. As they disentangled themselves everyone stared at the door through which Marasiah had left.

With a long sigh, Cade Skywalker said, "You two leave her for now. Let us try and handle it." His eyes caught Ania's, and the two of them followed Marasiah out of the room.

The silence in the chamber was awkward and grim. Saaraï asked Anj, "What do we do now? What happens if she doesn't fight with us?"

The pilot lowered her head. "We've gone it alone before."

"And you'll do it again?"

"It's either that or lie down and do nothing. Admit defeat." Anj blinked her eyes dry. "I lost a lot of friends back there. I can't forget that."

"Neither can I," Saaraï said. She'd only lost one person but that person had been everything. She saw tentative strength in Anj's eyes and was glad for it. For the first time since Porat's death she didn't feel alone.

As soon as the meeting was over, Ganner and Azlyn went looking for Marasiah. They couldn't find her aboard *Mynock*, and Deliah Blue said she'd gone outside. Morning mist rose



thick from Yavin 4's jungles, obscuring the treeline and dampening the earth. Even the nearby parked ships were draped in fog and it was difficult to recognize somebody three meters away.

They searched and searched and didn't find the empress. The best they got was Cade Skywalker.

"You can stop looking," he told them. "It ain't gonna do any good."

"We have to find her and convince her to help," Azlyn insisted. "Those rebels are going to need her. If not as an actual leader than at least as a symbol they can rally around."

"A symbol of what? *Chuba*, you've seen her. Does she look like an empress now?"

"No," Ganner admitted. "But she *is* one, and once she remembers that--"

"You don't get it. You think she was empress 'cause she was born to be one? By that logic I should be the Grand Karking Jedi Master like my dad. She was empress because she *chose* to be. Because she thought it was her purpose." Cade sighed and stared into the mist. "You all know where that got her."

Weakly Azlyn asked, "So what's she going to do?"

"Hell if I know. Hell if *she* knows. You can tell she's not right in the head now."

"We have to do something to help," Ganner said. "We have to remind her what her purpose is."

"You karking Imp Knights, always trying to save people. You're as bad as Jedi." Cade sighed again. "Take it from somebody who ran from his destiny for a long time. She'll either find hers or she won't. There's not a damn thing you can do about it. Just let her be."

In the worst moments aboard *Alliance*, Ganner had fallen back on his most basic oath. He'd failed to protect the integrity of the throne, his master Sinde, even his best friend, but he'd still saved his empress.

But he saw that hadn't. He'd saved Marasiah, whoever that woman was now. Ganner understood and felt hollow inside. It was that yawning emptiness, the kind he'd been fighting so hard since losing the Force. He'd fought with anger and with

duty but it was still there, waiting to swallow him, and for a dizzying moment he wondered if he should let it.

"The question you guys should ask is what *you're* gonna do now," Cade said softly. "And again, the only people who can answer it are you."

With that he wandered off and disappeared into the mist. Ganner and Azlyn stared into the grassy earth and themselves. It was a long time before Azlyn spoke.

"I think... I might go with the Jedi," she said.

"You mean with K'Kruhk?"

"And Master Tuum, and the others trying to get the Force back. They'll need all the searchers they could get."

"Oh," he said.

"You sound a surprised."

"It's not surprise. I just thought..." He struggled for words. "You've been handling it so *well*, Azlyn. Losing the Force."

She blinked. "You really think that?"

"You have. Better than me." He looked at his hands. "I feel like I'm on the verge of coming apart. I thought all these different things could hold me together but they can't."

She put a gentle hand on his arm. A long time ago her simple touch thrilled him with hope of something more. A part of him still felt that way for Azlyn, but after all they'd been through those hopes felt like childish dreams. It hurt to dwell on them.

And Ganner realized that that, despite the strength Azlyn had given him since they'd lost the Force, he couldn't rely on her anymore. He had to find his own strength or fall into the void. He certainly couldn't join the Jedi in chasing the Force. That was just another way of torturing himself with false hope. As Skywalker had said, the only direction came from within.

He lowered his hands and stared into the grass. "That's good, Azlyn. You should go with Master Tuum and the rest."

"What are you going to do, Ganner?"

He thought on the frenzy and desperation of *Alliance's* last hours. Of the suffering and death he'd been unable to stop. Of the engine of slaughter Hogrum Chalk had created.

"It isn't right," he whispered. "All those dead... we can't forget them."

"You're talking about joining the rebels."

"If they'll take ex-Jedi they can take ex-Knights."

"Is that what we are now? Ex-Imperial Knights?"

Ganner stared into the jungle mists and said, "Yes. There's no empress left to serve."

It was a curse and a liberation. It was like losing the Force all over again. Maybe this time, Ganner thought, he could handle it right.

Once Talon might have been proud to stand among the ruins left by Exar Kun and Naga Sadow. Right now she felt nothing. As she walked along the forest's edge, watching the clustered ships and temple ruins, she felt like she *was* nothing. She made no effort to hide herself; as she moved about half-veiled by the morning mist she drew some glances from Alliance and Jedi personnel, but none moved to seize her. Maybe they didn't believe their eyes. Maybe they didn't know her. Maybe they just didn't care.

It felt like the bottom of a long slide toward irrelevance that had begun after Darth Krayt's death. There didn't seem any further she could go. While no one watched, she went up to the base of one ruined temple wall and attempted to climb it. She scampered carefully over the surrounding rubble and when she reached the wall she used gaps between ancient brick as foot- and hand-holds. She didn't have the Force but she at least had her body, and that was enough to pull and push her to the wall's jagged peak. When she stood atop it she was breathing hard and sweating. Adrenaline rushed through her body. She almost felt alive.

But she wasn't. The Sith were gone and so was the Force. She'd tried so hard to cling to both those things, only to fail time and again. Eli's betrayal and destruction of the hypergate had been the last disaster, but she hadn't realized its full impact until she saw Saara, Darth Wyyrlok's daughter, standing aboard *Mynock* with the other refugees from *Alliance*.

Her father was a traitor, and his sins must be paid to the child. Darth Krayt himself had decreed that. Her master commanded her to punish Saara and it would have been so easy to do so. Skywalker, or whomever she told, wouldn't

believe her, but they'd investigate anyway. They might not find proof Saarai had been had a Sith, but suspicion could ruin her.

But after seeing Saarai on the ship, Talon hadn't even tried. She'd seen the fear and shock in the other woman's eyes and those alone told her story. Saarai was not Sith. She'd given up the pretense and desire and thrown herself fully into a new life.

Saarai had remade herself. Talon had realized that and felt a pang of surprising envy.

Wyyrlok's daughter had become a senator's wife and Alliance partisan. Talon had no idea what she might become herself. The Force and the Sith had defined her all her life. With neither strength nor purpose, there seemed no point to living.

Talon stood on the edge of the wall and looked down. It was a ten-meter drop into hard rubble, maybe twelve. She might survive, but if she pitched her body to land head-first it would surely kill her. It would be easy to do, but she shirked from it, just as she'd shirked from death's offer before. As a Sith she'd had no fear of death. That was no longer the case and she tried, rationally, to weight the cost and benefits of living.

There was no reason to survive. No strength, no purpose, no future. But irrational fear froze her. Against everything, Talon didn't want to die.

Ashamed for her survival, she stepped back from the edge. From her high vantage she looked out on the forest, the ships, the people scurrying through the mist below. Finally, she started crawling feet-first down the wall.

When she reached the rubble-strewn ground she was surprised to find someone watching her from the edge of the pile. On Rohakalla Khat Lah hadn't deigned to speak with her, though she knew much about him from Eli. The Yuuzhan Vong regarded her carefully, without word or gesture.

Talon watched him back. Then she stepped across the scattered stones and stepped onto the grass beside him.

"I saw you on top of the wall," Khat Lah said. "I felt your intentions."

She felt a flush of shame and anger. A Sith was robbed of the Force but a Yuuzhan Vong, of all creatures, had its favor. The galaxy truly had gone mad.

"It was a private moment," she said sharply.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion. But you are alive. Have you chosen what to do with that life?"

"No."

"Would you like to recover the Force?"

More than anything, still. "Yes," she croaked, and looked away.

"I'm glad to hear it. What would you do if you regained it? Would you rebuild the Sith?"

She found the idea had little appeal to her. As Eli had proved, she was a poor teacher.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"A fair answer." Khat Lah thought a moment. "When I took Eli Horn through the gate, I thought what he experienced would cure him of your teaching. It did, but it unleashed something I never suspected. The destruction of the gate is my fault as much as his. I have to atone for that."

Talon had seen the changes in Eli when he'd returned from the other side, but like everyone else, she'd failed to read them properly. He'd held his intentions close. Even now she wished she understood him better.

As if sensing her desire, Khat Lah said, "I believe I see some of his reasons. Eli was wracked between the dark and the light, the Sith and the Jedi. He felt failed by both sides. And, I think, bitterness for both groups. The way the Force returned to him on the other side was painful. It was even cruel. In silencing the Force, he thinks he is sparing the galaxy."

Talon recalled Darth Maladi's mad last rambling. "He is wrong."

"I believe so too. I wish I'd had a chance to argue with him." After pause the Yuuzhan Vong asked, "Why is he wrong?"

Talon thought on that. She knew she needed the Force; without it she was an empty shell of a person. But there was more than that. The Force empowered. It allowed beings to be more than what they were; greater or worse didn't matter,

but more. It wove mortal lives together in a great web, one Talon hadn't appreciated until the web was gone.

Eventually Talon said, "The Force is life, as the Jedi say. In losing the Force we lose life. All of us are hollow without it."

The Yuuzhan Vong considered. She glanced back at him; he gave her a tiny nod.

"Thank you for your time, Talon. We will speak later."

He turned and walked away, back toward where his Sekotan flyer sat on the grass. Talon watched his back recede, and it wasn't until he was far away that she realized he hadn't called her *Darth*.

She decided there was no reason to correct him. She looked back at the wall she's climbed, thought, then started up it again. Not to consider death this time, but to rest on that high place, watching and listening, thinking, considering life.

Despite all it had been through, *Free Agent* seemed to have come through in good shape. It had picked up its share of survivors from *Alliance* and had taken a few hits from chasing TIEs on the way out, but none of the damage was major. Once it was dirtside on Yavin 4, Sauk and AG-37 got to work on repairs. Ania frankly envied them the task. It was easier to fix machines than people, politics, or the Force.

Right now, she'd settle for the first one. She and Jao walked slowly around *Free Agent's* base. Sunlight had burned away most of the morning mist, revealing the forest rising high around the temple ruins, but it wasn't making him easier to read.

"I keep on replaying them in my head," Jao told her. "All those moments I could have gone through the gate. I should have insisted, but there was always some reason for me to stay behind."

"You couldn't have known what would happen."

"That's debatable," Jao grunted, and said nothing more. Ania still had only a partial idea of what had happened on Rohakalla and no idea why Eli Horn had destroyed the gate. Kyra seemed to have some clue, but she wasn't saying much either.

"So," Ania said, "What now? Do you keep trying to get the Force back?"

"There were times when we were wandering around the galaxy chasing dead ends that I was ready to give up. I wasn't happy but I accepted it. And then we got to Rohakalla. Kyra and Eli got the Force back. *Jariah* got the Force somehow..." He shook his head in frustration. "And Lowbacca. He got the Force back too."

She'd heard about the Wookiee's fate. "I'm sorry about what happened to him."

"He was a wise Jedi. I learned a lot from the time we were together." Jao looked at the high jungle. "He trained here, you know, when they used it as a Jedi academy. He told me about how *small* these trees seemed compared to the ones at Kashyyyk.... He said it took a while but he ended up loving this forest as much as the one back home."

"He got used to it," Ania said softly.

"He said he made his best friends here. Built memories. Accomplished things." Jao's gaze shifted to the slumping temple ruins. A few massive walls still stood but most had crumpled to rubble, spilled across the surrounding field, and been overgrown.

"So," Ania said, "You're still going to look for the Force."

"I think so. What those rebels are doing... it's brave. But without the empress I don't think I can help them." He glanced sideways at her. "How is she?"

Ania couldn't lie. "She's not in good shape. You know... I never knew what to make of her before, even during all our run-ins. I knew she was my cousin but in my head she was always the *empress*. Power and authority and all those things I never got along with. I think toward the end I got a look at the woman behind the crown."

She stopped and leaned her back against one of *Free Agent*'s landing struts. Jao circled in front of her and asked, "What did you see?"

"I saw a woman who'd only ever been an empress, or a princess. As she was really trying to do right with that power, because she thought that was her purpose. Her destiny. She's lost that and everything else too. Her crown, her family, even her self-respect. Everything that makes you want to roll out of your bunk in the morning."

"So what now?"

"I don't know, Jao. I wish I did. You can't fix her problems and neither can I. So what about you? You said you're going to keep looking for the Force. Any ideas how?"

"I don't know. I'll join in with some of the Jedi if I have to. I heard Azlyn Rae will be joining them, so I won't be the only Imperial Knight."

Disappointment tugged her heart downward; not that he'd say that, but because it was his first response. When they'd parted a year ago, Jao had gone off to rediscover the Force. Ania had gone off to rediscover her mom. The way they'd been pulled apart felt inevitable, and it had made her wonder if their two years travelling together and the bond they'd made was just a passing phase, two different people stuck together by chance and nothing more.

Maybe Jao still thought so. Ania asked, "You haven't talked to my mom much, have you?"

"No." His face creased as he remembered. "You said she's a Force-user too, isn't she? A Skywalker?"

"Yeah. I'm not sure what she has planned next, but I think this whole rediscover-the-Force thing might be up her alley."

His eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know what it means. I don't know what Sauk and A-gee have planned. I mean, Sauk might want to relocate with some refugees someplace. A-gee might want to start a legitimate freight company or something, and I'm not sure about Kyra... But if my mom wants to go searching, and they're willing to lend *Free Agent*..."

"Ah," Jao said.

"This place can still be your home again. If you want it to be."

"Ah," he repeated. He looked straight at her and she held his eyes. "I... don't want to presume. I mean, this is A-gee's ship."

"Right. I'm not presuming either."

"I never said that. But *if* he's okay running people around a hopeless quest..."

"He probably is. He's done it plenty times already."

"Right. But if he's okay with it, and *you're* okay..."

"I am. Turns out I'm a sucker for hopeless quests too." She smiled, reached out, and took his hand. "Welcome back."



His face twisted, then smiled back. "Thank you, Ania."

"Not a problem. I wanted to get that cleared up. But now I've got to run." His despondence showed. She squeezed his hand once, released, and added with a wink, "Family meeting. You understand."

One problem solved. Feeling light, Ania hurried across the grass toward what had once been Yavin 4's greatest temple.

The last Skywalkers sat among the ruins. This corner of the temple's base level still remained. Brick walls ten meters high converged at a right angle and provided a perch from which they could see the treetops on all sides and the strange collection of ships gathered on this abandoned moon. It was full daytime and the sky between thick clouds was blue, except for the place where the great gas giant loomed, its scarlet swirls half-faded by atmosphere.

They had a lot to talk about. Cade gave them an explanation of his experiences on the other side of the gate. It was more in-depth than he'd given anyone, including Jariah and Deliah. Ania looked perplexed by his description of Force-powered dream-landscapes, eruptions of raw energy, and godlike ascended beings. The old woman, Marin, looked intrigued. He wasn't sure about Marasiah. She paid attention, but he couldn't pick up anything from her sunken eyes or dulled Force-aura.

After he described the destruction of the hypergate Cade spread his hands. "You know where we are now. The Jedi want to find another planet like the one we were on, one that can give them back the Force. Before the gate got crashed we'd held back telling them about it, partly 'cause it wasn't our secret to give away but also 'cause we didn't think it could *stay* secret. If Jedi started coming to Rohakalla and coming back with the Force, then you'd get Imp Knights coming, and then... who knows. Anybody who wanted."

"Sith," Marasiah said simply.

"Anybody. You heard what I said, karking Jariah got the Force after I baked him by accident."

"I still don't understand how that's possible," Marin said.

Cade sighed. There was one part he'd held back, knowing all the while he'd have to get out with it. "When I stepped

into that eruption and got to communicate with the Whills, I tried to do this thing... which might not have been smart, seeing as I was already some incorporeal consciousness bridging planes of existence or whatever.”

“I really doubt I’m going to understand,” said Ania, “But what kind of *thing*?”

“When the Whills made me- us, Anakin, whatever- they made the Chosen One to fill this wound the Sith had made in the Force. But I wasn’t just bridging this plane and theirs. I could stretch even further. The Force all around us here is the Living Force. The Whills, they’re part of the Cosmic Force. But beyond that there’s something more. It’s like a fountain-head, and even living beings that die or ascend can’t touch it. It’s like the pure, primal power of the universe. Even what the Whills touch is lesser compared to that.” He glanced at Marin. “They teach this kind of stuff at Jedi school in your day?”

“A little bit,” the old lady said, voice was soft with reminisce. “My grandmother described something similar. She thought there was a wellspring that existed beyond light and dark, good and evil, everything. She called it the Unifying Force”

“My grandma didn’t have a name for it, but it sounds like they were talking about the same thing. The point is, I saw that power, I felt it, and I knew I could reach it.” It was hard to put divine revelation into words. You simply knew things without a *why* or a *how*. “I grabbed it and for this... timeless second I was a bridge. Unifying Force, Cosmic Force, *our* Living Force that we’re in, weak and muddled like it is, I could stretch across them all. And the Force moved through me like I was a channel and it was a big, gushing river. And that power flowed so strong it blasted all the way through the hypergate and baked Force-power into Jariah and Lowie.”

That was as best he could describe it. When he tried to remember his encounter with the Whills they became slippery. His mortal mind couldn’t hold on as when he’d been part of the Cosmic Force.

He’d been gazing down at the moss-covered brick as he talked. When he looked up Marin was still thoughtful, Ania still confused. Marasiah still inscrutable.

"If what you're saying is true," Marin spoke carefully, "They you can just open the Force for anyone. Maybe for a whole planet... maybe even for more."

"Yes. And when I was a bridge- for however long it lasted before the Whills stopped me- I knew that. I knew a lot more, too." He couldn't explain. Divine revelation worked the way it worked. "I knew that it became that bridge if I got strong and held it, I could soak every living being in this whole damn galaxy with the Force. I could give 'em back what the Whills and Celestials took from 'em a long time ago. But I'd have to *be* that bridge, you understand? Now and ever and always. I wouldn't be Cade anymore."

Remembering that scrap of certainty chilled him. He looked at the moss again. Very quietly he added, "If it could happen to me, it could happen to you all. You *are* Skywalkers, after all."

Ania shifted awkwardly. "Even me? I don't even *have* the Force. And if I did... I don't want to stop being me."

"Stang, you think I do?" Cade shook his head. "That's why I didn't try again once I realized what I was doing. But I realized I *could* have, if I really wanted. As it is, the Whills pulled me out. Tried to keep me contained with them but I was still a bridge going the other way, back to the Living Force. Jariah and Kyra and the Vong, they pulled me out. You know what it cost Lowbacca."

He sighed and looked high, past the surrounding women to the great jungle. He remembered Lowbacca's love for this place.

After a while Ania said, "Just because we *can* do that doesn't mean we will. If the Jedi find another planet like that, they can soak up the Force on their own time, like Kyra did."

"The Jedi and whoever else wants to find it," Marasiah said. "People who can't be trusted. Adventurers. Rogues. Even Sith."

Cade was about to defend adventurers and rogues, but Ania said, "Speaking of Sith, what about Darth Talon?"

As problems went that was small, specific, and firmly grounded in the mortal plane. He was thankful for it. "That's a question, ain't? She's got no Force. No Sith buddies either. In better times I'd say hand her over to the authorities and let

them lock her in a cell forever, but right now I'm even less fond of the authorities than usual. Don't wanna hand her over to Chalk. Those rebels are gonna be on the run and underground all the time. And the Jedi got better things to do than babysit one used-to-be Sith."

After a thoughtful pause Ania said, "She did save our butts on Coruscant."

"She's killed far many more," Marasiah said.

"So what? Do you want to just shoot her and leave her for the jungle?"

Cade couldn't tell if Ania had meant that as a joke. She didn't seem to know either. She looked around the group, seeking an answer.

He had something close. "Before that meeting I had a talk with Khat Lah. He and his Vong buddies are going to be searching on their own, but they'll be in contact with the other seekers. He told me- and I can't believe I'm saying this- that he'd be willing to take Talon along with him."

Ania frowned. "I heard Vong were masochists but that's a little much. Does he *want* to get stabbed in the back?"

"He said his people fell to the dark side, got stripped of the Force, and had to make a long ugly struggle back to redemption. And he said that, maybe, they had something to teach Talon."

Ania sighed. "I don't like just shooting a prisoner, but... Stang, I don't know."

"Well *Mynock* don't got a brig, so I know *I'm* not hauling her around," Cade said.

It wasn't much of a joke, and it fell pretty flat. Marin asked, "I'd like to help with the search. What about you, Cade?"

He shrugged. "I'm not crazy about dissolving into the Force. In fact, I really don't want that to happen. But if we could help the Jedi get back their powers- people like K'Kruhk, Azlyn, Ganner, Jao- I think it's worth a little time and effort. We can see how it goes. And how much more Jariah and Blue and willing to put up with my *stoopa* Force-quests. I've asked a lot of them as it is."

"Do you have anywhere to start?"

"Khat Lah does. The way he found Rohakalla was by talking to a lady- a really, *really* ancient Jedi's Force-

essence- inside a big black pyramid-thing on Tython. That's how we found it too."

"You've been to Tython?" Marin sounded surprised.

"Got the navigation data from the Jedi archives. Khat Lah's the one who found and dug up the pyramid-thing. A Tho Yor, it's called. He thinks he can go back, talk to it, and maybe get another hint. I figure he's right. It's our best chance."

"Then we have a plan. Good."

Quietly Marasiah asked, "Maybe you shouldn't be looking at all."

Marin stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"Losing the Force has changed everything and everyone. It's changed *us*. Even the few of us who still have it. And it's a change that can't be undone."

"But what are you saying exactly?"

"I'm saying I don't *want* the Force back." Her voice cracked. "The Force didn't save my parents or my husband, or my throne. Do you really think spreading the Force around will save this galaxy? That it will fix our problems?" She looked to Cade. "Your Whills were right to take away the Force. The only mistake they made was spreading midichlorians and making some of us deal with it."

Cade knew she was bitter and angry and had every right to be. He'd felt like that too once.

But it was Marin who said, "I turned my back on the Force once. I refused to use it or even hear it for a long time, as long as you've been alive. But I came back to it, and when I did I realized I'd needed it all along."

Marasiah's hands turned to fists. "Do you know what it is I want?"

"No," Cade said, and he'd been wondering.

"I want to destroy my uncle. I want to tear him out of this universe for everything he's done, and I want to *hurt* him as I do it. And I can feel the dark side inside me, begging to help. And all I'd have to do is say *yes* to that voice and I'd make my father look like a saint." Her head lowered and her shoulders shook. "Do you realize how *hard* this is? The Force is quiet for everyone but not for me and I just want it to *go away*!"

Cade had nothing to say that could help her. Neither did Ania, but Marin, expression soft, said, "I've been to places like that before. It's when I started shutting out the Force. Even if it was a mistake... it was what I needed at the time." When Marasiah said nothing, she added, "If you want, I think I can help you."

She picked her head up cautiously. "You can help me shut it out?"

"I can help you tame it. And maybe find yourself. I can't promise anything."

Marasiah exhaled. With heavy eyes she looked at Marin, then Ania, then Cade. She asked him, "Do you remember how we first met?"

Running from Socorro to Vendaxa with Darth Talon on their trail. It was hard to forget.

"You needed a ride," he said simply.

"I don't know where I'm going this time. I just... need to go."

"I *can* help you," Marin insisted gently. "But it won't be easy. And you'll need to help yourself along the way."

"That's all right. Self-control was... always important to my family."

"Well," said Cade, "looks like it still is."

Marasiah glanced at him, uncertain, then understood. A choking sob escaped her and she bent forward, digging palms across eyes to wipe away tears.

## Chapter Forty

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From the bridge of the star destroyer, Eli Horn could see Tython spread out beneath him. He could vividly remember his last time over this world. He'd had two prisoners aboard his ship but was still at the mercy of Cade Skywalker's *Mynock*. He'd been frightened and confused, deprived of his master and grasping for anything that could help him.

The planet itself looked the same for the most part. Gray and white clouds swirled over a surface of jagged mountains, deserts, forests, tundra and polar icecaps. Hanging above the planet, both in view from the destroyer's bridge, were the moons Ashla and Bogan. Nearly identical in size but colored respectively light and dark, they'd been the ancient Je'daii's first instruction in the dual nature of the Cosmic Force.

The planet and the moons had been here long before the Je'daii had arrived after being harvested from across the galaxy by the Tho Yor. The planet and moons would remain still. It was the Je'daii Eli had come to erase.

Eli, and the army at his back. Compared to his last time here it was impossible not to feel the thrill of power as he reached out with the Force to sense the minds of the thousands of crew on this destroyer. None of them understood why they'd come but they were doing their jobs anyway. Their minds hummed with calm focus. They'd taken it from the Federation's core fleet, followed it down the path provided in Eli's nav computers, and finally reached Tython. Stars seemed to crowd close around the planet,

though they were nothing compared to what had filled the sky on that spectral world.

Behind Eli a voice said, "We believe we have acquired the target, sir. Please provide confirmation."

The comment wasn't directed toward him but he turned anyway. Hogrum Chalk stood before the ship's captain, two meters of scars and metal draped in black. Even without tattoos he might easily pass for a Sith, but he was different from the ones Eli had known. He felt different in the Force. Chalk was a harsh man and a cruel master, but he took no joy in what he did. Rather than hot anger, Eli could sense from him a weary hatred for the universe and perhaps himself. He'd felt that hatred clearly when they'd first met, and at that moment Eli had known he'd been right to seek help from Chalk.

As the captain and the regent walked toward the gunnery console, Chalk nodded to Eli and beckoned him forward. The young man leaned close to them and looked onto the console screen. There was no cloud cover above the tundra and the destroyer's video sensors clearly showed the Tho Yor, one black square amidst a white snowfield.

"That's it," Eli told them. "That's the target."

"We detect no shields of any kind," the gunnery lieutenant said. "It should be an easy shot."

"Utilize all available turbolasers," said Chalk. "The initial volley should last thirty seconds of continuous fire. After that, repeat volleys as necessary. I want everything within twenty square kilometers of the target turned to glass. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Majesty," the captain said, and the gunnery crew got to work.

It didn't take them long to prepare. Eli and Chalk drifted to the front of the bridge to peer down at the planet. Eli tensed; he had no idea if the ancient device could fight back or protect itself. He wished they'd brought more than one destroyer but Chalk seemed to think this would be enough. Nonetheless, as the gun crew counted down to firing, he felt the regent tense as well.

When the count hit zero, a wave of laserfire shot out of the destroyer's ventral guns. The river of emerald destruction



narrowed as it fell into Tython's atmosphere and shrank further, until it was just a green speck against the white.

Eli saw the blast hit true: a tiny burst of fiery red. A second later he felt it. It came at him through the Force like a counterattack. The pain that stabbed his mind was like nothing he'd ever felt before; not his own and not that of any other sentient. The Tho Yor was an ancient Je'daii mind trapped inside and even older vessel, but the orbital turbolaser blasts were enough to crack the shell and incinerate the soul inside. What he felt was not a direct attack at him but the pain of death rippling through the Force. That soul that screamed agony carried twenty-five thousand years of existence with the Force, and the weight of all those ages sounded his skull.

Eli fell to his knees, clasped his head, and begged the scream to stop. A second or an hour later it did. The agony faded slowly in his mind, each echo smaller than the one before, until finally he could open his eyes and stand.

The entire bridge crew was staring at him. None of them knew what they were here for and only Chalk understood what they'd done. The regent watched Eli, scarred face betraying nothing, but he emanated a cool curiosity in the Force.

When Eli looked out the viewport he saw destruction still raining down on Tython. They were being as thorough as promised, but he knew the kill had been made. When the barrage finally ceased the gunnery crew were quick to report success. The target area and everything within twenty square kilometers had been turned to superheated ash. Even from orbit, Eli could make out a patch of burning red in the tundra.

"It is done," Chalk said simply. In a lower voice he asked Eli, "What did you feel?"

"I felt... an end." He rubbed a palm against his temple. A bit of the pain was still there, mercifully retreating. "There was a consciousness inside that Tho Yor. The soul of an ancient Je'daii. I felt it cry out in pain... and then fade away."

As Skywalker and Khat Lah had described it, the soul in the Tho Yor was already elevated, far from mortal but not quite a Whill. The being had had a name; he tried to remember and

failed. That saddened him; he owed it that much after what he'd done.

"My men will scan the surface for any further signs of life," Chalk told him. "I need you to reach out with the Force. If you find anything else on Tython, even a whisper of living power—"

"I know," Eli said grimly. "I know what has to be done."

Chalk stepped away and let him work. Some of the crew still gawked but Eli didn't care. He lowered himself to a meditative pose at the front of the bridge and, sitting before the viewport, he stretched out with the Force. Time passed and all he sensed beneath him was an untamed, uninhabited world, with patches of flora and some animal life, but nothing sentient and nothing that recalled the great power of the Tho Yor.

When the destroyer's crew pronounced the planet clear of life signs, Eli stood and did the same. Chalk seemed pleased. "We will begin withdrawal from the system," he said, "Tactical, dispatch an orbital probe to monitor for incoming and outgoing vessels. Helm, begin plotting out course out of the Deep Core.

The crew obeyed. They didn't understand why they'd come or why they were leaving but were glad the mission was done.

As they oriented away from the planet and prepared to jump to hyperspace, Chalk told him, "This is not the end. You said yourself that Skywalker and his companions will keep searching. I imagine the Jedi will be working with him too."

Eli had already thought about that. "I know. And I'm prepared to do what it takes."

"The talents you have are beyond value. I'm willing to invest you with great authority to make sure their hunt is in vain."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm giving you much and I expect you to give in return. My government is still precarious, and if it breaks Skywalker and the Jedi are all the more likely to succeed. I will protect your authority as long as you protect mine."

Eli understood exactly what Chalk was asking for. He wanted to see the Force silenced for good but he also wanted an enforcer who'd keep him in power.

"*This* mission in my priority," he said. "It always will be. I won't be your Darth Vader."

Chalk seemed impressed by the younger man's audacity. "I don't plan on needing one. But as I said, our fates are linked. We can only be helped if we help each other."

"I understand."

As the destroyer accelerated away from Tython, Eli understood something else. His mission would one day bring him face-to-face with those he'd betrayed. Deep inside he dreaded facing Skywalker, Khat Lah, Kyra most of all, but the day would come. It would be an awful battle but he had to win it. To save the galaxy from the Force, a terrible price would have to be paid.

"I'll be damned if I still can't feel it sometimes," Jariah said. "I thought maybe once we got away from Rohakalla it would be different, but no..."

"Blue says you saved our butts during the rescue op," Cade told him.

"Yeah, well. That just kind of happened."

"Listen *pateesa*, I'm the first guy to tell you the Force can be a major pain in the butt. But it's got uses too."

They were in *Mynock's* main cargo hold, re-taking stock of supplies after their hurried exit from Rohakalla. After Yavin 4 it was down to just Jariah, Cade, and Deliah again, plus two droids, so it was almost like the good old days. Almost, but not quite.

It was the damned Force. Sometimes Jariah thought it had left him alone forever. Then it would come out of nowhere. He'd get nagging feelings, or suddenly flashed on intuition about what Cade or Deliah were feeling. The fact that it all came and went on its own was the most aggravating thing.

With a sigh, Jariah sat down on a cargo crate. "I gotta ask," he said. "And you gotta be straight we me."

"Shoot."

"I've seen the way the Force works on people. Am I gonna turn into one of those red-eyed Sith murglacks?"

Cade actually laughed. "Why the hell would you think that? You're not Sith material, Jariah. You need self-control for that, not to mention ambition and better dress sense. Black leather and tats just ain't you."

"I said be straight with me. We all know I'm not Jedi material. I got way too many sins for that."

"True, true," Cade nodded. "Anger. Impulsiveness."

"Yeah, I know."

"Greed, laziness, mild sadism, hell of a lot of lust..."

"I said be serious!" Jariah snapped. "What is this gonna *do* to me? What *am* I now?"

Cade exhaled. "I don't know. Honest, I don't."

"If this thing would leave me alone I'd be happy. Most of the time it does. But then it just comes at me and I can't get a hold on it."

"Yeah. Like I said, it can be a pain in the butt."

"But you learned to control this thing, right?"

"Sometimes." Cade eyes him carefully. "Are you asking me to *train* you?"

"No! Well, maybe, a little. Just... help me get it under control. And help me *stay* under control. I don't wanna go Sith. I've seen the way the dark side eats people up. And I don't wanna go Jedi either. If somebody tries to turn me into one of those they'll end up erasing everything that makes me *me*."

"You mean the impulsiveness, greed, lust..."

"Exactly." Jariah sighed. "Maybe if we find another of those weird Force-y planets it can take this power away."

"I wouldn't count on it." Cade slapped his shoulder. "You're just going to have to get used to it. But don't worry. I'll be there to help."

That meant more to Jariah than he could say. He thought back to that dream where he'd seen through Cade's eyes. The moment they'd met everything had changed him in a way that would never change back.

The hold's overhead speaker scratched, and Deliah's voice rang out. "Wake up, boys. We're on our last jump to Tython."

"Glad to hear it," said Cade. "Our pals still with us?"

"That's right."

“Good. We’ll be right up.”

Cade started for the exit and Jariah pushed off the crate to follow. As they worked their way through the corridors to the cockpit he said, “At least it’s back to normal now. You, me, Blue, Artoo... You couldn’t unload Threepio?”

“What, you mean on Ania? I already gave her an empress to manage. I figured taking Goldenrod was the least we could do.”

“Good point. Having Her Mightiness aboard would’ve seriously clashed with our style,” Jariah said, and imagined how long it would take for her and Deliah to come to blows.

“Well, she so ain’t so mighty anymore,” Cade said without pleasure. “I don’t know how she’ll be with Ania’s crew, but they’re probably a better fit than us.”

They got to the cockpit just in time. Deliah was at the helm and she guided *Mynock* out of lightspeed. Tython soon swelled before them: one planet circled by twin moons. *Free Agent*’s engine cluster glowed ahead of them as it approached the world first. Jariah dropped into the co-pilot’s seat and checked scanners. Within seconds two more ships had appeared over Tython: one Jedi shuttle and one organic Sekotan flyer.

“Everybody’s present and accounted for,” Jariah said. As they waited for the planet to get nearer he asked, “How do you think Khat Lah’s gonna handle his new lady friend?”

“The guy’s pure barvy if he thinks he can tame that *schutta*,” Deliah said. “I don’t know what he’s thinking.”

“Talon’s got no Force and no Sith buddies left,” Cade said. “Right now she’s plenty tame, like a puppy that got kicked too many times.” Under his breath he added, “Reminds me a little of the empress.”

“Kick a puppy too many times and it’ll bite back,” Deliah said.

“Well, that’s for Khat Lah to find out. Not our problem.”

“Just hope it stays that way,” muttered Jariah. That weird Yuuzhan Vong’s problems had a way of becoming theirs too.

As the four ships got closer they pulled over Tython’s northern hemisphere. Jariah activated sensors and began searching for the Tho Yor. He didn’t have fond memories of their first time here and wasn’t looking forward to a return.

*Mynock* was still too far away for good scans, but *Free Agent* was closer. The comm board buzzed and Jariah tapped it on.

“What’ve you got?” he asked.

“You’ll see it in a minute,” Ania replied, voice grave. “Something’s very wrong.”

When they brought *Free Agent* low over Tython, Kyra stood up, clung to the back of Ania’s chair, and stared. Snowy tundra quickly gave way to fields of scorched earth. Kilometer after black kilometer raced by beneath them until one thing interrupted the despoiled plane. Even from a distance she could tell the Tho Yor had been ruined. The pyramid lay cracked open. Its peak had been incinerated and mere chunks of its eight stone walls remained. Dimly, she was amazed even that much had survived what must have been minutes of sustained bombardment. *Free Agent* pulled up over the Tho Yor’s broken heart and found it filled with ash and ruin.

Kyra reached out with the Force. She hadn’t had that power the first time she’d been here and she didn’t know what she was feeling for, but there had to be something. A whisper of life, an echo of power. All she felt was emptiness. Cold wind blew snow across ash and that was all.

“There’s nothing here,” said the old woman beside her.

Kyra looked at Ania’s mother and asked, “You’re sure?”

“Yes. This is a dead place.”

Kyra looked desperately to the back of the cockpit. Marasiah slumped against the rear wall, too far from the front for a good view, but she said, “There’s nothing here. It’s been totally destroyed.”

“What do we do now?” asked Sauk.

“We have to start again from scratch,” said Jao. He stood beside Marasiah, eyes just as bleak.

Kyra could feel their collective despair in the Force, but she felt something else well inside her. “This damage... it had to have been done by a cruiser from orbit, right?”

“Probably,” Ania tapped the comm. “Let’s talk to your friends. *Mynock*, you still up there?”

"Yeah, we're here," Cade voice scratched. He'd kept his ship high above Tython.

"Your scanners picked up anything?"

"Yep. Looks like somebody dropped an unmanned satellite to watch for intruders."

"Great."

"We found element traces in orbit too. It's kinda scattered and must be a day or two old, but there's a lot of it. And it matches what you'd expect from the ion exhaust on a *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer."

Exactly what she'd expected. Ania said, "Got it. Thanks."

As she shut off the switch Kyra rasped, "You know who did this, don't you?"

After a tense moment Marasiah said, "Only my uncle could have this firepower."

"Yes, but who knew about the Tho Yor?" asked Ania. "Who could have led him here? Who could have-"

"You *know* who," Kyra said.

"Eli," Jao whispered.

After they'd left Rohakalla, Kyra had gone through alternate bouts of bitter recrimination and listless lack of purpose, sporadically broken by bursts of death-defying action. Now everything came into focus and she understood the true cost of her failure to understand Eli.

Like the destruction of the hypergate, this was on her. And it was on her to make it right. She looked down at the lightsaber- Eli's lightsaber- she wore from her belt, then grasped it so tight her hand hurt.

"Eli's working with Chalk now," she said. "He's got every resource he could want at his disposal."

"That means the hunt's just gotten a lot more dangerous," Ania said.

For us, Kyra thought, and for *him*. She'd thought her place in the events to come was with Ania and Jao, but she understood now that she wasn't the same person she'd been when they'd freed her from Socorro. She'd changed too much on the other side of the gate.

"I need to get in contact with the rebels," she announced.

"Wait, what?" Ania said. "Why? What do you think you're doing?"

Marsiah was unsurprised. “You’re taking the fight directly to my uncle.”

“To Eli,” Kyra corrected. “If you go searching, he’ll be out there trying to stop you, every step of the way. Somebody has to stop *him*.”

“Kyra, no,” said Jao, “It doesn’t have to be you.”

But Marasiah watched her with cool acceptance. She understood, even if the others didn’t. Kyra looked to Marin and felt something from the old woman, not approval but empathy.

“I should have stopped him before it got to this.” Kyra squeezed the lightsaber harder. “But late’s better than never.”

She looked out the viewport once more. The sprawling scorched black was an accusation, but it was also a purpose. She saw it clearly, and she knew that in what lay ahead the Force would be with her.

It would be her tool, her weapon, and more.

For the first time in her life, Kyra understood what destiny meant.



## Coda: A Long Time Ago...

Bathed in the strange blue-white of dual suns, the great arch loomed high overhead. Boxed in by canyon walls, constructed of natural-seeming stone, the arch was unusual but gave no outward hint of its truly remarkable history. If an ignorant traveler had happened upon it- though no such traveler would happen upon Rohakalla- they would never guess at what was locked inside. Even the Jedi Master now sitting at its base couldn't tell; though he probed outward with the Force he found no whisper of its power. To his senses, it felt like dead stone and nothing more.

But it was more than that, and Qui-Gon Jinn knew it. Otherwise he'd not have followed a trail of rumors and information-scrapes to come here.

The voyage had already been fruitful. The alien seated in front of him was unlike any he'd seen on his travels. The long-necked body was draped in a robe but three-clawed hands were folded over a bound volume of time-yellowed paper. A blue face with short snout peeked from under the hood, and reptilian eyes seemed to reflect the ghostly shade of the twin suns.

"Thank you for sharing your knowledge with us," E'Lorem said. The Kwa's Basic was careful and halting, but surprisingly accurate. "It has been many of your decades since a visitor has come to our world. You've told us much about what's happened in the galaxy beyond."

"I wish I had better news to tell you," said Qui-Gon.

"The ills in your Republic are not unique. Every government goes through periods of strength and decline. Sometimes the process is so slow mortal beings cannot see it."

The longer view gave no comfort. Political decay on Coruscant bothered Qui-Gon less than other things.

"What truly worries me is the darkness in the Force. Yoda and the other Masters old enough to remember speak of a specific moment when they felt it tip away from the light. They said it was like a wound had been made in the fabric of reality. And just a few years ago, we felt it again. It was as the old Masters said. It felt like an act of violence."

"You believe the Force itself is under attack?" asked E'Lorem.

"I don't know if that's even possible." Qui-Gon spread his hands. "The Jedi have many schools of thought. I was hoping you might tell me yours."

"You've told me that you consider yourself an adept of the Living Force," the Kwa said thoughtfully. "You try to follow the Force as it guides you from moment to moment."

"I do."

"Do your Jedi hold that there is more to the Force? Another layer, perhaps?"

"Master Yoda speaks of the Cosmic Force. He believes all those living now pass into a higher plane after death. In dying, they dissolve into the Force, lose their individual selves, but become an immortal part of it."

"And the Cosmic Force is viewed as a separate plane? A door one passes through on dying, but cannot pass back?"

"In essence, yes. I imagine you've heard similar theories from other guests."

"In our time, Master Jedi, we have heard *every* theory. That is one of the oldest." E'Lorem stroked his book. Earlier he'd taken Qui-Gon to the subterranean library where hundreds more such volumes charted the history the galaxy as recorded by the Keepers of the Whills. The treasure trove of information was all in alien pictograms, totally inaccessible to the Jedi.

"You asked me if the Force was under attack," Qui-Gon said. "I know what I felt. I don't know if it was made against

the Cosmic Force or the Living Force, but a wound was made.”

“And who do you think made that wound?”

“I don’t know. They say the Sith have been extinct for over nine hundred years... but if they did exist, they’d be the obvious culprits.”

“We have heard much of the Sith. If they concentrated their power, perhaps they would be able to reach through the Living Force and wreak damage on the Cosmic, which would in turn echo back to the Living.”

“Is that your theory?”

“Based on our knowledge, yes.”

If so, the Sith possessed power even the Jedi did not. It was hardly the comfort Qui-Gon needed. He’d spent nearly six months following rumors and myths so obscure barely any Jedi had heard of them. He’d even left his apprentice Obi-Wan on Coruscant under the pretense of giving him independent study. It was a slightly shameful thing for a Master to do and he knew the Council frowned on it; nonetheless, he’d felt compelled.

The wound Qui-Gon had felt in the Force unsettled him more than he’d admit to any other Jedi, even Yoda. He felt they collectively stood on the verge of a precipice. Something drastic was needed to right the Force’s darkward tilt. When he’d hinted this to other Jedi they’d told him he was overacting and imagining greater threats than actually existed; to him this sounded like the bland assurances of the complacent.

Qui-Gon looked at the great silent arch. The Keepers of the Whills said it had stopped worked over ten thousand years ago. Entropy had claimed pieces of its ancient machinery; the ancient Gree hypergate had simply broken down. Since that time no one had passed through, and he wondered how much time had distorted stories of the world beyond. Even the Kwa, with their meticulous records and centuries-long lives, were not immune to romantic myth. Half-truths may have piled on over the millennia, aggregating to a lie.

Still, the idea enticed him: a place where the Force was so raw it could give form to dreams. Even beings without high midi-chlorian counts could touch it there, which seemed to

defy everything the Jedi knew about the Force, but to Qui-Gon it gave hope. It would be ultimate proof of his deepest belief: that every single life in the galaxy was bound together by the Force, even those who could not feel its pull; all lives bound together in one great symbiosis.

A place like that world, he thought, could restore balance, but it was a place he'd never see.

Qui-Gon allowed a sigh; despite all the stories the Kwa had told him, he seemed no closer to a solution to the Jedi's problem. Sensing this, E'Lorem said, "Do not despair, Master Jedi. You have taught us much, and we are grateful. There are still things we can teach you."

"I very much hope so."

"You brought up the layers of the Force, what the Jedi call Living and Cosmic. You say that when a life passes into death and joins the Cosmic Force it loses it's self, while gaining immortality in the Force."

"A paradox, I know." Qui-Gon smiled weakly. "We Jedi are fond of those"

"Would you believe that it is possible to pass into the Force without losing self?"

He regarded the Kwa carefully. The ability to retain some of one's self in death- to achieve an afterlife within the Force- was another of those mythic skills that, if they'd ever existed, were looked on by modern Jedi as legend. As a follower of the Living Force he tried to exist in the moment, but the idea of eternal life did have an appeal. He'd always been drawn to anything that pushed the boundaries of the Jedi's accepted understanding. It was, he thought, the only way to fight the complacency that was afflicting the Order.

"I... would like to believe that," Qui-Gon admitted.

"It is a belief long held among our kind. To truly pass into the Cosmic Force you must purge yourself of intention and ego and allow yourself to enter the flow without resistance. To preserve self, you must surrender self."

"Another paradox," he smiled.

"The Force itself is one. Everywhere and nowhere. Invisible but all-powerful." E'Lorem spread a clawed hand. "Embracing paradox is the path to wisdom."

"If you're willing to teach me, consider me your pupil."

"I am glad. But it is a skill that must be guarded carefully, like we guard this place."

"I won't lead other Jedi to Rohakalla. I respect your desire for privacy. But I admit I don't entirely understand it. You guard a gate that hasn't opened in ten thousand years. If you contacted the Jedi Order, we could use all our resources to help reactivate it."

"Your Jedi don't possess the skills or the technology to open the gate."

"No, but we can help you look. It seems to me that you don't *want* the gate reopened."

Qui-Gon wondered if he's said too much, but E'Lorem's reply was measured. "One day, perhaps, we will. You yourself said a dark power is ascendant. Imagine if your phantom menace opens the gate. They may tip the Force even more toward darkness, or create an army of soldiers given wholly to evil."

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted, "But you cannot let fear of the worst rule your decisions."

"We do not," hissed the Kwa. "We have always held to hope. In our oldest tale it is said that one day the Force itself may act to create a life. That life will carry the purest strength into the Living Force and hold light and dark in balance."

Qui-Gon stiffened. "The Jedi have a prophecy of a Chosen One who will be born of the Force and bring balance to it. It's a very old one. No one is sure where it even started."

"Perhaps it was spread by one who visited this world."

"And your people believe this tale?"

E'Lorem bobbed his long head. "We learned it from the Jed'aai who helped us construct the gate. There is no source we trust more."

Qui-Gon shuddered and looked at the arch. He'd come all this way hoping for a solution that would tip the Force back toward light. Despite all his years as a Jedi he still had his vanities; sometimes he'd imagined himself as the one who would heal the Force's wound and correct the darkness. But he was old enough to admit it was only vanity. He'd come to realize, gradually and sadly, that there was no solution he could enact himself.

Yet if this Chosen One existed and could be found...

He shook his head. He was chasing the impossible, like Yoda always said. He needed to concentrate on the moment, as he often chided Obi-Wan to do. "I'll consider your story. If you can show me the portions of your Journal that first mention the prophecy, I'd be grateful."

"That can be done."

"Good." Qui-Gon stiffened and placed hands on his knees in a classic meditation pose. "Before that, though, you had other wisdom to share with me."

E'Lorem hissed pleasantly. "You wish to preserve yourself by surrendering yourself."

"I wish to try." The Jedi smiled gently. "It's a paradox I'd like to embrace, if I can."

And so E'Lorem undertook to teach him in the shadow of the gate. Qui-Gon concentrated on the Keeper's words and his gentle guidance in the Force. Yet even as he trained a part of his mind kept drifting that first and final prophecy. It was a fool's hope, yet it held such allure.

He forced himself to concentrate on the lesson at hand. The Force offered many gifts but not all were for him. Qui-Gon might not save the Force from darkness but he could still use the gifts it offered to learn, to grow, and perhaps transcend.

And if by miracle the chance for salvation appeared, he would protect it with his life.



